

# **Martial Arts Films and the Action-Cop Genre: Ideology, Violence and Spectatorship**

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## **Abstract**

Martial arts films, perhaps unlike any other sub-genre of film, maintain a unique relationship with spectators. Martial arts, when exhibited in film, signify a mode of conflict resolution that is at once brutal and elegant. In this essay I am most interested in martial arts films as a sub-genre of action-cop films, especially their emphasis on the body. Through content analysis of two contemporary martial arts films (*The Glimmer Man* and *Dragon Fire*), I draw the following conclusions: a) martial arts films can be located in the action-adventure and crime film genres; b) martial arts films promote ideological readings similar to those consistent with action adventure films emerging in the 1980s; c) martial arts films promote ambivalent readings of dominant culture, especially class, power, and status; and d) with the recent success of Steven Seagal, Chuck Norris, Jon Claude Van Damme, Jackie Chan, and to a lesser extent, Cynthia Rothrock, production quality of martial arts films has dramatically improved and this has required greater attention to matters of filmic style. I conclude that while martial arts films continue to evoke attention to the powers of rugged individualism, conflict resolution through violence, and patriarchy (if not misogyny), they also celebrate folk wisdom, and skepticism of class and power in the populist tradition.

## **Introduction**

Martial arts films, perhaps unlike any other sub-genre of film, maintain a unique relationship with their spectators. Martial arts, when exhibited in film, signify a mode of conflict resolution that is at once brutal and elegant. The complex choreography characteristic of martial arts films led early analysts to the association between them and the musical genre (e.g., Kaminsky, 1974), especially musicals punctuated with complex choreography of the kind associated with Fred Astair, Ginger Rogers, Gene Kelley, Mitzey Gainer, and Donald O'Conner. While I will not pursue an analysis of martial arts films from the perspective of spectators, I do wish to emphasize the extent to which fans of martial arts films actively participate in the completion of the filmic experience. To a certain extent, spectators are drawn to martial arts films with an eye toward reconstructing choreographed fight scenes. That is, both practicing martial artists and those merely stimulated by what they perceive to be a form of lethal poetry, view martial arts films to glean techniques. In my experience as a practicing martial artist, I have known many skilled associates (black and brown belts) who scan newly released martial arts films to watch their favorite on-screen fighters, hoping to catch a glimpse of something new that they may be able to graft on to their technique.<sup>1</sup> I mention this here, at the outset, because I

believe that martial arts films represent perhaps the clearest path to recognition of associations between filmic imagery and spectatorial mimesis. This has particular relevance for sociologists interested in the ways in which films within the action-cop and gangster genres contribute to the proliferation of violence in America. But it further anticipates the kind of argument I will put forth in this essay, namely, that spectatorial involvement of the kind associated with martial arts films creates a milieu wherein a web of political, economic, and cultural associations assume greater significance. Simply put, when spectators become enveloped in filmic discourses, when they suspend disbelief, the potential for manipulation of the kind intimated by Adorno and Horkheimer, Brecht, and others, intensifies. So, while this is not an analysis of spectatorship, the relevance of the discourses that will be discussed in this essay is intimately related to it.

For this essay, I am most interested in martial arts films as a sub-genre of action-cop films, especially their emphasis on the body. Jeffords (1994) contends that in most of the meathead hero films (Kellner, 1995) the well developed body signifies national strength. He also suggests this strength is juxtaposed to the soft body of women, clearly no match for the pending peril characteristic of action-cop and gangster films. Within the action-cop genre, those possessing the hard body usually defeat evil villains through violence, extreme if necessary, suggesting that the only solution to social problems is violence. There is never a place in these films for mediated settlements, conversation, depth of character, or displays of emotion beyond anger and rage. And while hard bodies suggest the antithesis of bureaucracy, action-cop films are characterized by single acts of warrior courage. So rather than working as part of a social movement to change political, economic, or social conditions, the action-cop genre continues to promote the politically secure message that we will tolerate acts of violence committed by a lone renegade, but acting in a group may be politically and ideologically quite dangerous (Hess-Wright, 1995).

What martial arts bodies possess is mastery over movement. Spectators can delight in the ability demonstrated by martial artists to determine their every movement with precision. Moreover, martial artists are always in control of their situations. Regardless of the number of attackers, martial arts films present the hero as a hard body capable of dispensing with any competitor. This combination of artful mastery over movement and ability to control violent situations suggests that martial arts films signify multiple desires in spectators. In screen theory the ideological relevance of the star as personification (signifier) of all desirable (especially masculine) skills suggests that the embodiment of these skills in one person makes them appear natural. Stars signify the ideal. What spectators see when they witness stars on screen will differ depending on their experiences, expectations, and the like. The character portrayed by the star will possess qualities desired by the spectator, and for the time they are able to view the film, spectators will experience a sort of wish fulfillment. The ideological ramifications suggest that when spectators view martial artists on screen (people who both in their actual life as skilled practitioners and with the help of cinematography are capable of miraculous feats of bravery and technique), they are likely to interpret those star images as real representations of what men (and more frequently women) should and can be. That is, stars possess in their characters all desirable qualities of a man, and a woman. When compared to them, we, the spectators, fall far short. The ideological ramifications are clear. If they can do it, why can't I? According to genre conventions, individuals can survive without the group, competition is better than cooperation, and violence will solve our most dreaded problems. Spectators experience catharsis after viewing films because of the

incompleteness of our subjectivity, our divided selves (Lacan, 1977). Stars have no divided self; they are whole. For martial arts films this aspect of spectatorship is even more prevalent than in the action-cop genre generally. Spectators are aware that the stars they view on screen can actually perform many, if not all, of the techniques demonstrated on screen<sup>2</sup>. Similar to viewing athletes in any sport, the sense of mastery over bodily movement is total. When these performances are crafted for film, all of the necessary components are in place (e.g., urban landscapes, music, lighting, and costumes) to inflate the image of the star and his or her skills into the realm of fantasy.

As a cultural product martial arts films have received relatively little attention from Marxist sociologists (or any other critics for that matter). And, while there are probably good reasons for this (e.g., traditionally poor production quality, simplistic plots, extraneous violence, etc.), it is my contention that martial arts films contain discursive elements that defeat easy categorization within contemporary Marxist accounts of film. Contemporary renderings of Marxist analyses of filmic influence emphasize discursive manipulations of class, race/ethnicity, gender, and age, as well as politics and ideology in the interests of dominant culture. While each is figured in different ways in the two films discussed below, readings of this discursive field are confounded by contradictory messages.

The thesis I will attempt to establish in this essay consists of the following elements: a) martial arts films can be located in the action-adventure and crime film genres; b) martial arts films promote ideological readings similar to those in action-adventure films emerging during the 1980s; c) martial arts films promote ambivalent readings of dominant culture, especially class, power, and status; and d) with the recent success of Steven Seagal, Chuck Norris, Jon Claude Van Damme, Jackie Chan, and to a lesser extent, Cynthia Rothrock, production quality of martial arts films has dramatically improved and this has required greater attention to matters of filmic style. In brief, while martial arts films continue to evoke attention to the powers of rugged individualism, conflict resolution through violence, and patriarchy (if not misogyny), they also celebrate folk wisdom, and skepticism of class and power in the populist tradition.

### **Ideological Relevance of Martial Arts Films as Genre**

In her analysis of genre and ideology, Judith Hess-Wright (1995) argues, much in the tradition of Marxist influenced mass cultural theory, that genre films “serve ruling class interests by maintaining the status quo” (p. 41). There are a number of ways that this manifests in film: a) by posing and then by solving all conflicts emerging in the film and, in so doing, allaying spectatorial anxieties about unpredictability; b) by promoting solutions to problems that are certain not to confront dominant cultural institutions head on; c) genre films resolve conflicts in ways consistent with dominant cultural commitments to the ideology of individualism, law and order, and masculine strength; d) genre films, especially the action-cop and gangster films, simplify gender, racial, ethnic, class, and status distinctions; and finally, e) their resolutions to social problems (e.g., eliminating the hedonist villain) offer a cathartic resolution to both conscious and subconscious fears of spectators.

In his analysis of crime novels, Ernest Mandel (1985) posits the *catharsis hypothesis*. He concurs with the likes of Benjamin, Fromm, and Bloch that the

tedium of life under capitalist social relations produces the need for excitement. Reading crime novels provided this outlet for the literate middle class during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, while film has offered the same outlet for the working class and poor. For Grant (1995), genre films have become the contemporary counterpart to tribal mythology. Each of these theorists shares with mass culture theorists the belief that spectators are positioned in ways that promote acceptance of dominant cultural interests. Mandel (1985) views the mass reproduction of novels as marking the initiation of this process in literature, while MacDonald (1969), following Horkheimer and Adorno (1972), makes the same claim relative to film. The reproduction of formulaic films assured studios of a profit. Only minor changes in narrative were necessary to reproduce genre films. Moreover, studios were able to be flexible enough to produce films for niche markets (e.g., art films).

The most interesting aspect of genre theory, I believe, is viewing genre as mythmaking, or collective symbolism. Gangster films of the 1920s and 1930s were viewed as working class hero myths, tales of rags to riches (Clarens, 1997). Film noir emerged in direct opposition to any belief that an individual could rise from the underclass to the top. To be certain that young people avoided emulating their gangster heroes, the Hayes Code was adopted. While the Code was dropped during 1966 in favor of the new ratings system, it is clear that mythmakers were still at work in the action-crime genre. Despite two decades of films challenging the status quo, the 1980s and 1990s returned to themes dear to the preservation of capitalist social relations. Why?

### **Genre and Masculinity**

Kellner (1995) argues that film narratives popular during the 1980s and early 1990s resonated with conservative ideological views. During the 1980s, Ronald Reagan symbolized what had become a vigorous movement on behalf of white men to regain their status in all facets of American life. Following Jeffords (1994), the crisis of the nation is a crisis of manhood. Films depicting American confrontations with Soviets revived the myth of America as innocence and strength (Kellner, 1995: 59). This was a period, argues Kellner, when white males suffered extreme paranoia, and viewed themselves as victims (of feminism, civil rights). What was needed was a re-masculinization of American males<sup>3</sup>. Film narratives played a role in cultivating the image of males as unwavering and unattached warriors, men who must “go it alone, renouncing erotic pleasure” (p. 67). In addition, the Reagan male was competitive, interested in sports, honor, and success. In this world only the elite succeed (p. 77). This kind of ideological message is necessary in a world that requires strength of body to compete. What emerges, then, are what Kellner refers to as “meathead hero films.” These heroes are “resentful and inarticulate.” Once again, a parallel can be drawn between the historical evolution of great detectives in novels, and film heroes. Prior to the turn of the century, detectives were characterized, not by action, but by intellect. The same is true of action-crime films during the first third of this century (since most crime films were influenced by crime novels of Raymond Chandler, Agatha Christie, Ellery Queen, and other notable writers). This changed in the latter third of the century. Today, action and attention to the body signify iconographic changes in crime films.

What follows is a content analysis of two contemporary martial arts films, each presenting multiple and complex interpretations of body, power, violence, class, race/ethnicity, and gender.

### **The Films: *The Glimmer Man* and *Dragon Fire***

#### ***The Glimmer Man***

*The Glimmer Man* showcases actor and Aikido expert Steven Seagal. In this film, Seagal plays the part of Jack Cole, formerly a New York Police Department detective who has recently joined the Los Angeles Police Department. His partner, veteran detective Jim Campbell, is played by Keenen Ivory Wayans. *The Glimmer Man* attempts to tell two stories simultaneously. The first theme centers around attempts to locate a serial killer who, having murdered his victims, poses them in forms resembling crucifixion. The second theme, the one that eventually dominates the film, centers around the sale of Russian nuclear warheads to an American arms dealer through the Russian Mafia. This aspect of the film is more complicated in that it involves a CIA operative (and former commanding officer to Cole) as a ruthless calculating soldier of fortune. Mr. Smith, as he is referred to throughout the film, joins forces with an American arms merchant. Together they attempt to score a large shipment of Russian weapons.

The opening credits appear over black and white film shot in cinema verité using a handheld camera. The setting is a decayed urban landscape shot at night. Rapidly passing images of urban blight are shot with a camera mounted on a trolley. These smooth flowing black and white sequences are interrupted with momentary snapshots of corpses. Loud, aggressive music plays in the background. Unfortunately, this scene represents one of the few stylistically interesting moments in the film. I mention it because it speaks to directorial efforts to produce a film with auteur attention to color, sound, and image, an indication that within this sub-genre filmic quality is improving. *The Glimmer Man* has three sets of characters who initiate action: 1) the serial murderer; 2) the American arms dealer; and 3) the police.

The opening scene of the film produces the first causal act, initiating the relationship between the police and what appears to be a serial murder. In this scene, police detective Jack Cole (Seagal) is introduced to his new partner, Jim Campbell (Wayans). Campbell is a veteran with the Los Angeles Police Department. This scene is used to initiate the multiple character differences between Cole and Campbell. Cole is dressed all in black, wearing beads draped around his neck (and Seagal's signature ponytail). This is in obvious distinction to the more conventional dress of his new partner, Campbell, and each of the other detectives with whom he will interact. The inducement to action is initiated while Cole and Campbell ride together in Campbell's unmarked patrol car. Cole accepts a call for assistance to confront a teenager who has taken a hostage at a local Catholic high school. Campbell chides him for responding by saying that it's not their responsibility. Cole responds by saying, "We're in the neighborhood." Upon arrival at the school, Cole approaches the room where Johnny Deverell, the student hostage taker, is holding a gun on his classmates. This scene makes use of a handheld camera. Having convinced Johnny to release his young female hostage, but without being seen, Cole bursts through the door to the classroom with his gun pointed at Johnny. The camera zooms in

(employing a profile shot) on the cocked hammer of the weapon, then slides along the arms of Cole without losing sight of the gun, until the camera is facing Johnny. Johnny places his gun to his head, despondent over the news that his girlfriend is leaving him. Cole rushes Johnny, carrying him through the window behind him and into a room one story below. With debris all around, and Johnny now safely lying on top of him, Cole remarks, "I hate this job." Once on the ground, Cole is lightly reprimanded by Campbell for not awaiting backup ("This isn't New York"). This scene is important because Johnny turns out to be the son of the American arms dealer, Deverell. When Cole is later approached by Deverell's bodyguard, Donald, to testify in court that Johnny is insane and needs to be committed, Cole dismisses him. Donald attempts to pressure Cole by claiming that Deverell is a very powerful man, someone who could make or break a career. Cole responds by saying, "Tell your asshole boss, that no one threatens me."

The relationship between Cole and Deverell becomes further entwined with subsequent investigations of crucifixion style murders. Through references to the ways in which the victims are slain, Cole concludes that there is more at work than a serial murderer. At this point, he decides to visit with Mr. Smith. Smith is a CIA operative who knows Cole well. Cole asks for information on "consultants" working the area. He claims he knows the murders are the work of a professional, not a serial murderer. Later in the film, Mr. Smith returns as a confidant of Deverell, each of whom stand to gain from the receipt of illegal weapons from the Russian Mafia.

The relationship between Cole and Campbell is revealing. In a scene prior to his contacting Mr. Smith, Cole is shown in what appears to be a meditation room, complete with a Buddhist altar. Cole lights incense and burns candles. A statue of Buddha looms in the background. In a scene meant to convey the emergence of a friendship between Cole and Campbell, Cole takes Campbell to Chinatown for what is, one presumes, the first time without it being police-related business. Cole and Campbell enter a small Chinese grocery where Cole speaks to the proprietors in Chinese. Incense in the store produces an allergic reaction in Campbell who begins to sneeze. Cole hands him a tablet (ground deer penis) and tells him it will cure his allergy. Later in the film, following a fire at Campbell's apartment, Cole uncovers cases of deer penis tablets. These scenes are clearly meant to portray Cole as not only eccentric, but wise. Finally, prior to the first fight scene of the film, Cole tells Campbell that he cannot fight because he is a Buddhist. Only seconds later, however, he is shown slitting the throat of a member of the Russian Mafia using a razor blade disguised in a credit card. This scene initiates the defeat of seven Russian Mafia at the hands of Cole and Campbell. This is the first martial arts fight scene.

The additional details of Cole's life are extrapolated using few extra characters. His current wife, or girlfriend, appears only briefly during a scene when Cole tells her that Ellen, his ex-wife, has become one of the crucifixion murder victims. And through his conversation with his former commander, Smith, we learn of his lethal skills. Like *Rambo*, Cole was the product of United States military training. Given his association with Smith as his mentor and former commanding officer, Smith is clearly a character who stimulates action. Beyond these scattered insights, there is little in the way of additional information forthcoming. As for Cole's partner, Campbell, we learn virtually nothing. Aside from his frequent on-screen ranting and handling of routine, Campbell's character is shallow.

*The Glimmer Man* is a film that seeks to establish Seagal's character as more than "just a cop." His superficial flirtations with the symbolism of Buddhism attempt to create a clear departure from the "evil" characters in the film. So while the film makes a weak attempt to develop the character of Cole as one who stands apart from the crowd, this cannot be said about any other characters; simply too little information is provided.

The character of Cole is seemingly motivated by a desire to promote justice. His willingness to respond to any call regardless of its location, and to place himself in harm's way, suggest that he is a zealous cop. But his training as a special services operative (making him more lethal than the typical law enforcement officer), in addition to his pretensions to Buddhism, characterize him as something of a super cop. One scene in particular serves to establish this point. Cole appears at a restaurant he knows to be frequented by Mr. Smith. The manager is informing telephone inquisitors that the restaurant is closed. When Cole tries to enter, he is stopped by the manager. Cole ignores him and continues on into the restaurant and past the bar. He is approached there by Mr. Smith's bodyguard who threatens to hurt him if he doesn't leave. Cole slaps him and throws him out of the way. Cole proceeds to the back of the restaurant where he finds Mr. Smith eating lunch with a state senator. Upon arriving at the table, Cole is once again confronted by Smith's bodyguard who this time insults him. The discourse is important: "Why don't you take your little sensitive ponytail, and your little sissy beads and get out of here." The man grabs Cole, Cole breaks his hold, and throws the man through a window. Following his conversation with Mr. Smith, Cole is confronted with eleven CIA operatives in what is the second fight scene in the film. Cole defeats them all, suffering only a bloody nose.

Aside from his martial arts prowess, Cole is an expert linguist (one suspects this is due to his work with the CIA), and sleuth. While trying to uncover the identity of a young female victim, Cole surmises her to be Russian. This he determines based on her physiognomy. Cole dissects the victim's right breast, uncovering a breast implant. With that bit of evidence, he and Campbell will determine her identity. Campbell stands by as Cole deduces, creating the appearance of impotence.

### ***Dragon Fire***

Unlike *The Glimmer Man*, actors in *Dragon Fire* are recognizable only to those familiar with the martial arts. It is also the case that *Dragon Fire* is primarily a showcase for martial arts combat. Unlike the relatively complex plot constituting *The Glimmer Man*, *Dragon Fire* is characterized by a seemingly simple universal theme in the action genre generally, and martial arts films in particular – honor, family loyalty, and friendship. In this respect, *Dragon Fire* signifies a continuation of a tradition in martial arts films initiated by Bruce Lee. Bruce Lee was cognizant of racial, ethnic, and class divisions in American and Asian culture, and his films reflected his opposition to them (Little, 1996). Similarly, *Dragon Fire* envisions a futuristic dystopia characterized by interplanetary travel. Those left to survive on earth are members of the working class and poor. And as is so often the case in martial arts films where the focus is on displaying the diversity of martial arts techniques (consider Van Damme's *Bloodfist* series, or his most recent film *The Quest*), racial and ethnic diversity is present and, typically, presented respectfully. Gender signification, on the other hand, is complicated by its ambivalence. Female combatants at the junker

(martial arts combat), for example, are respected for their skills. However, each camera shot initiating a scene at the Trocadero 2000 strip club is a close-up of nude women dancing. While more will be said below, the appearance of female nudity directly following violent fight scenes makes this juxtaposition too obvious to discount.

The plot of the film is simple. Laker Powers, the brother of Johnny Powers, arrives on earth from New World 2 (ostensibly a far better place than earth) to retrieve his brother who, for reasons not apparent, has remained on earth. Laker and Johnny will then return to New World 2. Upon arrival on earth, however, Laker discovers that his brother has been murdered. Laker vows to find his brother's killer.

Laker's motivation is clear; he seeks to locate his brother's killer. In the second scene, Laker's interplanetary travel ends in a crowded noir street scene. This film, to its credit, is filmed almost entirely in shades of gray, black, white, and pale blue. Largely dressed in black, or black and white, those who pass Laker in damp, dimly lit, littered, and crowded alleys, are almost all Asian. Laker is Caucasian, wearing a bright white jacket. While moving through the alley, Laker is jumped by three Asian males. While he defeats them using his expert martial arts skills, he loses his wallet. The fight is interrupted by a tall black male, Slick, who commands the street toughs to leave, and offers to buy Laker a drink. Slick befriends Laker.

While at a strip bar named the Trocadero 2000 (with a clientele reminiscent of *Blade Runner*), Slick refers to Laker as "star gaze," a derogatory slang for those who have made it off the planet. (This theme appears throughout the film. Laker is confronted by two gang members who refer to him as "star gaze" – this seems to be a reference to those who have escaped their class position.) This scene also introduces Eddie, a longhaired Caucasian who wants Laker to help him with a scam to take money from two undesirables with whom he happens to be playing cards. Eddie will split the winnings with Laker outside. Since Laker lost all his money, the deal is set.

Once outside, Eddie, a good-natured soul who wears a perpetual smile, formally introduces himself to Laker. Laker confides in Eddie that his reason for being on earth is to locate his brother. Eddie, clearly disturbed by the news, informs Laker that his brother has been murdered. Since Laker has nowhere to sleep, Eddie offers his apartment. The fourth scene takes place at Eddie's apartment and introduces the next significant character, Eddie's sister Marta. It turns out that the apartment is hers and she wants no company.

At this point in the film, each of the primary characters has been introduced. It is also significant that at this point Laker decides to visit a police officer to gather information about his brother's death. Like most of the crime film and action genres, especially since the early 1970s, we find that law enforcement is both inept and uncaring. While sitting in his littered office, the police detective says, "There are at least 100 murders a week in this zone," and that, "Earth is a fucked up place." While more will be said about this perception later in this essay, it is important to mention here that perceptions of street violence, and the inability of law enforcement to do anything about it, have the effect of promoting individual responses to violence. This same theme has been identified in the *Dirty Harry* and *Walking Tall* films of the early 1970s, and the *Rambo*, *Die Hard*, and *Terminator* films of the 1980s. My reason for mentioning this is that while there appears to be no motivation on the part of law enforcement to intervene on behalf of justice, there is actually something far more pernicious at



work. Indeed, in *Dragon Fire* the police detective charged with responsibility for bringing justice to his jurisdiction financially benefits from the activity that led to Johnny's death – the “junkie.”

The junkie is a weekly fighting competition where any and all fighting styles can compete for a cash purse. Throngs of people crowd into a large warehouse to place bets on each fighter. Fight scenes are reminiscent of a confluence of heavy metal video, a boxing arena (an old man roaming the crowd collecting bets is reminiscent of boxing trainers; moreover, his age adds legitimacy to the event), and the most recent incarnation of Muay Thai kickboxing, the Ultimate Fighting competitions. In these scenes, the crowd is mostly adorned in black leather jackets, white or black t-shirts, and blue jeans. Laker is still sporting his white jacket, clearly differentiating him from the “regulars” who attend the junkie, and citizens of earth more generally. The crowd is unruly, snarling, shouting, and gesturing at the fighters. The competitors represent their respective arts with surprisingly little aggrandizement. The fight scenes are often quite brutal, and, unlike *The Glimmer Man*, they appear with regularity. Like most scenes in the film, the fight scenes are cast in shades of gray, black, and white. There is no humor presented to break the tension. These fight scenes do not glorify the violence. The fight scenes appear as relatively organized violence. No effort is made to sugarcoat it.

Little is known about Laker's past. Indeed, there is very little in the way of character development done relative to any character in this film. All action is motivated by literal, visceral, manifest initiatives. Laker seems to be an amiable man. He readily befriends Slick and Eddie. He never swears; he wears only white shirts and a white jacket. He is loyal and, one is led to believe, chivalrous. A scene at the Trocadero 2000 is perhaps telling of his character. While Laker and Slick sit at a table next to the stage at the strip club, Laker displays a gaze that is neither accepting nor disapproving. By way of contrast, Slick is clearly engaging the male gaze to thoroughly absorb the dancer's body. Laker notices that the dancer is Eddie's girlfriend, Marta. The scene is clearly meant to involve male spectators in traditionally male viewing. That is, Marta's body is shown from the perspective of the male patron at a table looking up. When Laker meets up with Marta following her performance, she asks him what he thought of it. Laker is clearly disgusted. Marta responds by saying, “Sometimes you gotta do what you have to do, even if you don't like it.” Laker leaves her sitting at the table. There are many possible interpretations of this scene. For example, in the action genre women are seldom participants in the resolution of conflict (if anything, the opposite is true). This scene could be read as Laker refusing to be distracted from the pursuit of his brother's killer. It is also possible that Laker simply finds earth a morally deficient place.

In a street scene (again at night, as no one in this film ventures out during the day), Laker spots his brother's leather jacket, now being worn by a Rastafarian who witnessed the murder. He confronts the man, reclaims the jacket, and transmogrifies into the “dark side” previously inhabited by his brother. In each of the remaining scenes, Laker is shown wearing nothing but black shirts and his brother's black leather jacket. The symbolic transformation of Laker is accompanied in the film by more obvious references. For example, following his first victory in the junkie, Laker meets Slick at the Trocadero 2000 to recoup his winnings. As he enters the bar, the soundtrack blasts, “When I get to the dark side....” It is also at this point that Laker gives in to the tempestuous Marta; the two confirm their feelings for each other, first by kissing, and later by sharing an intimate love scene.

Aside from his pursuit to avenge the death of his brother, so little in the way of character development takes place that Laker comes off as a superficial, almost cardboard protagonist. The same cannot be said for his nemesis, Slick. Slick is motivated by revenge and money. He befriends Laker by passing along his insider's wisdom of the junker, the only place Laker will find his brother's killer. Slick informs Laker that Johnny was not well liked. In the opening scene of the film, we watch as Johnny sadistically defeats an opponent at the junker. Following his victory Johnny is jumped in an alley. Slick sees in Laker an opportunity to make money as a fighter in the junker. In some scenes shot with a visually interesting use of oblique angles and dim lighting, Slick appears as a tall, beret and sunglasses wearing mentor. While Laker works the heavy bag, Slick recites words of Buddhist fighting wisdom from memory. He appears as a streetwise philosopher.

There is the sense that Slick and Laker have developed a friendship bond. However, as events in the film unfold, it becomes clear that it was Slick who murdered Laker's brother. Following his victory in the junker, and the realization that none of the competitors in the junker was the killer, Laker and Slick meet for the final confrontation of the film. Unlike Laker, Slick has character. He is smart, tough, witty, has style and attitude. To the extent that there was much character development in this film, it all seems to have been written for Slick. When the final confrontation scene occurs, it is difficult to feel much antipathy for Slick. What we knew of Johnny suggests he was a despicable person, not someone we could much care for. And, since the scenes involving Johnny's character appeared so early in the film, considerably greater time and evolution was given to developing the friendship between Slick and Laker. Since this is a narrative film, and since time is important to the telling of the relationships, this appears as a major narrative flaw. As such, closure comes as an uncomfortable bloodletting. Indeed, at one point during the final fight scene between Laker and Slick, Slick admits to befriending Laker and offers Laker the opportunity for both of them to walk away. It is during this scene that we realize that in order to win at the junker, Johnny had severely beaten Slick's brother. Slick's motivation for murdering Johnny was revenge. Laker refuses to acknowledge Slick's rationale, and kills him to avenge the death of his brother.

There are two secondary characters in the film, Eddie and Marta, who help complete the outline of the primary characters. Among the two, Eddie is most interesting. This film was clearly written to convey an image of a world in chaos. There are no scenes shot during the day, where, one presumes, daylight may intimate hope or possibility. The only conveyance of hope and happiness comes through the character Eddie. At no point in the film does Eddie curse, get angry, scheme, manipulate, or do anything that may suggest a person who has given up – this despite living a meager life (he relies on his sister Marta to pay the rent, and on his proficiency at the junker for spending money). During a training scene involving Slick, Laker, and Eddie, Eddie is brought to the training facility that had, up to that time, been solely occupied by Laker and Slick. Slick invited Eddie to serve as a sparring partner for Laker. Since Laker and Eddie are friends, it is difficult to get either of the men to press to the point that would be necessary to prepare for fighting in the junker. Slick shouts to Eddie that he will pay him various sums of money if he will hit Laker. Finally, when the amount is right, he does. At that point, Laker takes him out. Eddie, bloodied, simply bounces off the floor, still smiling, to congratulate Laker on his skill. Even in those scenes involving Eddie fighting at the junker, he remains optimistic. My sense is that Eddie represents those who persist, regardless of their circumstances, never stooping to devalue themselves. Eddie was a refreshing juxtaposition to the gloominess of the film.

The last of the secondary characters is Marta. Marta's character is not well defined. What we learn about her is very superficial. Initially, Marta and Eddie share an apartment. To pay the bills, Marta dances in a strip bar. While Marta does begin to show an interest in Laker (although the reasons for this are never explained), her role in the film never moves too far beyond window dressing. In some ways she serves in a role much like Eddie – a juxtaposition to the ugliness pervasive on earth. However, the superficiality of her character, and its presence in the film as an object of the male gaze, serves the obvious function of appealing to the targeted male spectator. This character signifies the perpetuation of female degradation in martial arts and actions films generally.

### **Genre and Martial Arts Films: Reading *The Glimmer Man* and *Dragon Fire***

Brown (1993) contends that the action-cop genre is constituted by a conventional three act format. In the first act we are introduced to the major players; in the second act we see the plot advanced through conflict; act three provides resolution to the conflict. *The Glimmer Man* reproduces the action-cop genre conventions nearly to the point of parody. As the convention goes, a brilliant but troubled cop is teamed with his (almost always a man) negative other. That is, we are introduced to a pairing of opposites, a Derridean bifurcation if you will, where the ideological message suggests that no matter how unique, our racial, ethnic, and class differences can be overcome to achieve the greater good; in this case, the preservation of law and order. Of course, Derrida (1981) would suggest that the pairing of antithetical partners indicates an effort to construct an ideal through contrast. In the case of *The Glimmer Man*, Jack Cole is juxtaposed to his "negative other" Jim Campbell. Not only are the characters (racially) black and white (as is the case with most of the ideological content in action-cop films), their respective appropriation of cultural capital indicates that Jim Campbell is inferior in his ability to recognize clues (recall the morgue scene), in his knowledge of other cultures, in his fighting skill, and finally in his skills of deduction. It is Seagal who possess all of this information in the traditional ideal-typical way. This, of course, is the cornerstone of both detective novels as well as film stars.

Act one also introduces us to the villain. In the action-cop genre the villain is always hyperreal, a sadist who seems to kill at random and who enjoys mutilation of the body. Villains are important because they personify social evils (drug dealing, greed, and arrogance), and their elimination signifies a metaphoric return to civility. Moreover, callous, emotionally devoid, and rigid villains represent discursive associations with corporate culture (buildings, bureaucracies, surveillance, etc.). Crimes committed by these villains are motivated by greed. While villains in action-cop films are despicable, they are nonetheless well dressed and businesslike in many other ways. Again, *The Glimmer Man* follows genre conventions. The true villains in this film are intelligent, wealthy, and representatives of justice agencies (CIA operatives). Deverell inhabits a world of mansions and servants, and possesses an icy demeanor. In conjunction with their Russian counterparts, they slaughter innocent people simply to misdirect the police. Not only do they kill their victims, but they mimic a particularly sadistic serial murderer, one who fashions his victims into crucifixions. This kind of behavior prepares spectator support for virtually any fate that befalls the villain. Moreover, as Brown suggests, given

the magnitude of evil and the disregard for conventions of law and order, resolution of the case often becomes a matter of personal interest for the hero.

While *Dragon Fire* avoids these more conventional stereotypes, key players in the film are introduced in act one. It is also the case that act one introduces the pairing of the partners. These partners are also (racially) black and white, but what is unique in this film is the lack of antithesis between them. In this respect *Dragon Fire* flirts with traditional martial arts film conventions by establishing the relationship between the hero and the villain as between student and mentor. In this sense, then, the negative other possesses desirable skills (street smarts, philosophical agility, and martial arts skills), some of which are absent in the lead character. Historically, conflict in martial arts films reaches a crescendo that pits the hero against an elder sage. This mythological portrait of youth in opposition to authority, or in Freudian fashion the classical struggle between father and son, is interpreted here in quite a different way. The student, Laker Powers, appears to be of a higher class background than his earth-based mentor, Slick. The ideological interpretation of this relationship can be construed as being quite critical. A well placed white male returns to the ghetto to retrieve his brother. To be successful he must rely on the skills of a streetwise philosopher who has learned how to survive in a Hobbesian world of all against all. This message resonates with the work of Paul Willis (1977) and Jay MacLeod (1995), each of whom have written about the multiple ways in which working class and poor people preserve their subjectivity amidst depravity. This point, however, cannot survive the ideological conventions in the action-cop genre. In the end perseverance belongs to the “white knight” who appears from Camelot to save his brother.

The villain in *Dragon Fire* is less evil than the action-cop genre would suggest. In fact, as I indicated above, it is difficult to determine who the real villain is. Slick killed Laker Powers’s brother, Johnny. But Johnny was a rather despicable fellow. Slick killed to avenge the brutal beating Johnny dealt his brother. Moreover, in keeping with the dystopian feel of the film, there are no elite, well dressed, but evil characters calling the shots in this film. In this way, considerably greater ambiguity is introduced in the construction of the polarities. As such, one is not certain who to side with. In this instance it is conceivable that the narrative suggests a leveling of responsibility. This makes character identification more interesting and less ideologically suspect than what is presented in *The Glimmer Man*.

The second act is constituted by multiple villains, mostly minor characters, who put our hero to the test. This characterizes the action of both films. It is also the case that spectators learn of the villains’ primary motivation – greed. Again, this characterizes each film. The action-cop genre of the 1980s and 1990s inherited the 1960s and 1970s distrust of bureaucrats. But it is also the case that the lone hero has the primary intention of preserving law and order. His critique of dominant political, economic, or cultural institutions never gets in the way of his preservation of them. Rather, our hero’s philosophy is organized around a hard-boiled belief that the individual is better equipped to handle problems than a group. As such, it is typically the case that our rogue cop realizes that in order to resolve the conflict he will have to bypass convention and resort to extreme measures. Again, the audience has been prepared for this through the numerous scenes of sadistic violence perpetrated by the villain. Since the genre established the inability of conventional law enforcement to effectively eliminate the problem, the hero must go it alone using any measure of skill at his disposal. Finally, the last of the second act genre conventions is moral clarity; matters of right and wrong are clearly discernible.

*The Glimmer Man* makes use of the “inefficiency of law enforcement” narrative convention to legitimate the use of extreme force (Cole slits throats with a razor blade in a credit card, etc.). The primary motivation for the villains in this film is greed, maximizing profits from the illegal sale of stolen Russian munitions. As if spectators missed the point relative to the immorality of our villains, *The Glimmer Man* invokes a religious motif. Not only have the villains violated the sanctity of human life, but by invoking crucifixion, they have declared war on God. The ideological juxtaposition of Russians, the CIA, and the Super rich with God indicate more than the desire to clarify moral righteousness. And with the exception of the inclusion of the Russian mafia (the Soviet Union has always supplied the action genre with its villainous negative other), this juxtaposition of discursive representations could be viewed as a progressive polarity. In *The Glimmer Man*, moral clarity hits you over the head like an axe kick.<sup>4</sup>

Once again, *Dragon Fire* is more difficult to interpret. The complacency of law enforcement in the resolution of crimes of murder is so thoroughly embedded in the action-cop genre that only a brief two-scene reference is enough to legitimate Laker, and each of the secondary characters, in taking the law into their own hands (e.g., the cop responsible for investigating Johnny Powers disappearance is later witnessed at the junker placing bets). Moreover, much like in *The Glimmer Man*, numerous rogues appear from alleyways willing to challenge our hero. The motivation for the murder of Johnny is not greed, but revenge. Since money can be made from his participation in the junker, it is greed that motivates Slick’s relationship with Laker. What is more confusing in *Dragon Fire* is morality; it is never entirely clear who among the lead characters signifies the righteous. To the extent that nearly every participant in this film is required to immobilize someone, the entire film, following Fred Glass (1990), can be read as a “swollen penis.” Morality in *Dragon Fire* is clear in only one aspect, the hero’s (Laker) relationship with Marta. As is typical in the action-cop genre, women only receive authority when it is dictated to them by men (Gibson, 1994). Otherwise women are diversions for the hero in his quest to solve conflict. The matter of morality arises when Laker appears disgusted at Marta’s nude dancing. This is clearly not appropriate behavior for “good girls.” The scene where Laker first views Marta’s act, ends when he leaves her sitting alone at a table in the bar. In the iconography of masculinization, male heroes cannot be distracted from completion of their mythologically predestined journey by the sensuous temptations of women.

The question posed by *Dragon Fire* is whether there can be justice by any means other than absolute revenge leading to death. In case spectators are not certain of this, at one point in the film Laker appears desperate and angry but uncertain as to what to do. Slick shouts at him, “What do you want Laker, you want justice or revenge? Because if it’s justice you want, you’re on the wrong fucking planet.” It’s hard to be more explicit than that. Clearly, the reference suggests not only the ineffectual nature of law enforcement, but the more conservative position articulated in action-cop films of the early 1970s (*Dirty Harry*, *Death Wish*) that verges on fascism. This is a world where only vigilante justice will do. This is the hero’s moral dilemma, and in this instance the hero chooses revenge. What is curious, however, is it is Slick, the man who will be the eventual target of Laker’s revenge, who confirms for Laker the position he must adopt. Again, given the circumstances presented around Johnny’s death, moral ambiguity marks this film.

Act three offers the audience what Brown calls “the hero’s redemption.” It is during the final act that the hero “systematically eliminates the villain and his cohorts, each of whom suffers a unique and excessively violent death (p. 82).” Heroes are redeemed in the eyes of legitimate criminal justice; as Brown asserts, “their way was right (p. 82).” The final scene in both *The Glimmer Man* and *Dragon Fire* produces the kind of redemption Brown refers to. In *The Glimmer Man*, violence escalates in direct proportion to the significance of each of the villains. For example, the closing scene is of Donald, Deverell’s security man, descending a window and being impaled on a wrought-iron fence below. His figure, from above, takes the shape of a crucifixion. This is a deserved fate since it was Donald who murdered and crucified throughout the film.

*Dragon Fire* produces a moment of redemption, but not one that necessarily legitimates law and order. In the final scene Laker and Slick confront each other. Along the way, Slick has killed two witnesses to his murder of Johnny, each without remorse. When Laker realizes it was Slick who murdered Johnny, but that he did it to avenge the beating of his brother, Laker could have chosen to walk away. After all, up until the realization that Slick was the murderer, Laker and he were best of friends. Perhaps it is in this kind of tale where the prevalence of a moral lesson is invoked to an even greater extent. That is, the hero in this fantasy succeeded in his quest to uncover his brother’s killer. He survived the “tests of the gods” by defeating each of his competitors in the junker. For Laker to have settled for anything less than the defeat of his brother’s killer, would have meant a rewriting of the hero myth. There would have been no apparent justice. And perhaps more importantly, the hero would have been seen as weak. In the end, as Brown makes clear, the action-cop genre is about mythic wish fulfillment.

## Conclusion

As a sub-genre of action-cop film, martial arts films require deconstruction because they constitute the embodiment of the desiring male spectator more completely than any other sub-genre type. As such, symbolic representations of political, economic and cultural phenomena signify considerably greater influence with predominantly male spectators.

Kaminsky (1974) once drew association between martial arts and dance. Like dancers who appeared in film during the heyday of the Hollywood studio system, martial artists who appeared on film possessed the seductive capacity to lure spectators through bodily movement. Today it is true that in addition to their years of training in the martial arts, martial artists who appear in film attend a rigorous training and education facility in Boston, Massachusetts, where they learn how to perform on-screen fighting. Constructing the mythological warrior for film requires, among other things, perfecting the art of break-falls, exaggerated motion, and the use of techniques that typically would not be used in actual street combat. When combined with the application of multiple camera angles, stage lighting, sound, the use of slow motion, and landscape, spectators are seduced into acknowledging the uniqueness of the warrior relative to themselves. Following Lacan (1977), these warriors signify self-sameness. They are the total embodiment of male desire. They are emotionless, powerful, lethal, fearless, and above all in control. It is their body in motion that signifies control, not only over their bodies, but by extension, over any situations they may find themselves in. Full command over performance suggests what Kaminsky (1974) referred to as “superhuman agility” (p. 129). Even though Kaminsky

recognized the association between martial arts and dance, he did not take his explanation for its appeal much further than an ability to represent mythical morality tales for working class audiences. In addition to more obvious narrative conventions used in action-cop films, the body of the martial artist must be viewed as a signifier.

Violence as a discursive vehicle constitutes an important aspect of martial arts films and their narrative appeal for spectators. It is my contention that martial arts films, unlike other genre-driven discourses, involve spectators as co-conspirators in a film's narrative.<sup>5</sup> Other genre films do this as well (e.g., horror and science fiction), but martial arts films offer spectators force of movement, agility, and self-preservation, and it is all self-contained. Since techniques are demonstrated in slow motion, using multiple camera angles and repeated movement, it is possible for even a novice to mimic what they see. McKinney (1993) suggests that violence in film forces spectators to consider their moral foundations. Thus, it follows that acts consisting of strong violence encourage engagement with filmic discourses, thereby opening the possibility of greater spectatorial participation in the construction of meaning. It is this aspect of martial arts films that I find most compelling. I have attempted to demonstrate the ways in which two martial arts films signify race, ethnicity, class, and gender. The next step would be to study spectators more closely to identify the extent of media imagery on attitudes and behaviors.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Kaminsky draws a similar conclusion in reference to street kids, especially urban black males, who watched the 1960s and 1970s Bruce Lee films. Kaminsky believed that the martial arts, when portrayed on screen, conveyed the kind of material sensation that would allow spectators to believe they too could actually move with similar alacrity. The result was young men, standing on street corners or on playgrounds, shooting off rounds of pseudo martial arts technique.

<sup>2</sup> Jackie Chan figures prominently here. Chan is noted for acting out each of the often spectacular stunts used in his films. This is relevant on a number of levels. First, Chan effectively exploits this aspect of his work as a marketing tool. Interviews in film and popular press magazines, as well as visits to late-night talk shows, emphasize this aspect of his work. Next, in keeping with Jeffords (1994), Lacan (1977), Kellner (1995), and many others who focus on the relevance of the body as the locus of desire in film, Chan's extraordinary martial arts prowess signifies totality, completeness, virility, and dependability. This is especially important, as Kellner (1995) and Gibson (1994) suggest, in post-Vietnam America, where rugged individualism, competition, and re-masculinization appear as the predominant American mantra.

<sup>3</sup> This point is effectively made by Gibson (1994) in his book *Warrior Dreams*. The post-Vietnam era required a vigorous restatement of masculinity following the humiliating loss to the Vietnamese military. Gibson's work is interesting because it focuses attention on the cultural manifestations of the re-masculinization process. For example, Gibson provides a detailed analysis of paintball and those who participate in it. He suggests that this mode of "warfare," one that relies on sophisticated and often expensive weapons, replications of military costuming, intricate planning of maneuvers, and a nearly perverse emphasis on "getting the kill," suggests the manifestation of the masculinization process. He notes that nearly all the participants are male, but most important, they are males who disproportionately have not served in the military and so have not been able to establish their legitimate claim to masculine authority within the culture.

<sup>4</sup> An axe kick requires the raising of the leg to its highest point and then dropping it with full force on the offender's shoulder.

<sup>5</sup> Grant (1995) makes a similar point relative to genre films in general. My emphasis is a bit different in that I am not only referring to the psychic content brought to the cinema by spectators who complete the viewing experience through interpretations of filmic images. Beyond that, it is my belief that spectators who view martial arts films do so in a way that promotes active physical mimesis. Spectators are seduced by the physicality of the martial artists. In this way, it is not only the technical aspects of these films that are absorbed by spectators, but, and this is the point as it relates to violence, through their willing acceptance of these on-screen warriors, they are more vulnerable to dominant cultural ideological manipulation.