



Reframing the ‘Violence’ of Mixed Martial Arts: The ‘Art’ of the fight



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ABSTRACT

This paper deploys conceptual and analytical tools from cultural sociology to analyze Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). While often characterized as violent and uncivilized, MMA has a core following of fans who watch MMA and consume MMA media out of an interest in the aesthetics of the sport. As salient actors within the ‘internally legitimate’ sphere of the sport, this paper explores the way the MMA media construct symbolic boundaries around different kinds of fights through aesthetic and moral evaluations. Through qualitative content analysis of MMA media discourse, I attempt to reconstruct their general aesthetic principles, demonstrating a fourfold typology of MMA in practice: repulsive ‘excessive violence’, boring ‘insufficient action’, soft ‘palatable practices’, and sublime ‘aesthetic violence’. This framework allows the MMA media as ‘connoisseurs’ to create hierarchical ‘distinctions’ between their aesthetic attitudes and those of more casual ‘mass’ audiences. This research may prove useful for scholars interested in MMA, culture, and sports media studies.

A historically controversial sport, the merits of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) have been the subject of dispute since its inception. Concerns have centered primarily on the violent nature of MMA in practice. With a small circle of niche media predominately covering the sport, the MMA media occupy multiple roles surrounding the sport; as critics, aestheticians, and knowledge producers. These ‘insiders’ of the MMA landscape inform dedicated audiences, who perceive the sport as technical (Cheever, 2009) and aesthetic (Andrew, et al., 2009; Zembura & Žy & ko, 2015). This raises important questions about contentious cultural forms; specifically, how do MMA media reconcile the issue of violence in connection with the ‘legitimate’ enjoyment of MMA? What aesthetic systems or principles do they invoke towards that end? And how do these MMA connoisseurs create ‘distinctions’ in a cultural field perceived largely as uncivilized? Unpacking MMA media’s approach to violence allows us to see how their ‘cultural’ work can make violence the subject of artistic appreciation.

The shocking, transgressive, and provocative nature of different cultural forms can be essential to their enjoyment and legitimacy *within* ‘art worlds’ (Becker, 1982). This is seen everywhere from high-fashion that revels in ‘over-the top’ and iconoclastic designs, to genres of music like death metal that rely on demonic, guttural vocals and atonality. To maintain legitimacy within the art world itself, this ‘contentious content’ cannot be purposeless or random; rather it must be accompanied by a logical and defensible aesthetic system. Without this, their understanding as ‘art’ is severely limited within the art world itself. Understanding how violence is framed in relation to this aesthetic system shows how insiders make sense of the violent aspects of the sport they regard so highly, and reveals evaluative rationales that may extend to different spheres of cultural production and consumption. Furthermore, how and why these seemingly transgressive elements are enjoyed may provide new logics of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). The historical shift from distinctions based on the consumption of ‘legitimate’ high-culture towards those based on omnivorous tastes (Peterson & Kern, 1996) provides grounds for social difference in the appropriation of even those cultural forms considered by many as uncivilized.

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Understanding how, and through what criteria these distinctions are made demonstrates the logic of distinction in fields like MMA that are only ‘internally legitimate’ (Baumann, 2007).

This paper seeks to demonstrate that the deployment of concepts from cultural sociology onto MMA allows for an illuminating analysis, as is it relates to aesthetics and taste. However, some may consider it an extreme liberty to (1) treat sports media as analogous to critics of arts and culture, and (2) to treat MMA as art more generally (for example, Alexander (2003) delineates sports outside the sphere of ‘art’).¹ Towards the first point, while MMA media are not ‘critics’ in the conventional sense, the evaluation of fights (both before and after they’ve taken place) is a large part of MMA media, and sports media in general. MacNeill (1998) notes that sports media journalists make judgements based of a range of factors: moral values, aesthetic values and professional values. Historically, before television, sports journalists often used their extensive literary skill that made sports reporting thoughtful and philosophical, helping sports develop a formal aesthetics of appreciation (Rowe, 2003). Furthermore, viewers of televised sports are fascinated with the aesthetic terms and conditions of sports coverage itself (Raunsbjerg & Sand, 1998). Thus, while not critics in the conventional sense, sports media produce (aesthetic) judgements that interest their viewers and frame their understanding of sport in practice.

Towards the second point, the argument that sport can be art is an old idea. Aesthetics have been identified as a prominent motivation for sports consumption more generally (Raney, 2006), and related to factors like competition (Krohn, Clarke, Preston, McDonald, & Preston, 1998; Wann, 1995) and the beauty and artistry found in sports movements (Zillmann, 1998). Boxill (1984) argues that the concern for efficiency and competition does not necessarily overshadow the concern for beauty, and that like art it serves as a means of self-expression, both of which are hampered by a lack of skill. However, while much of the ‘sport as art’ debate is philosophical, I would argue that the fact that many people who enjoy performing and watching sports see them as art is, in itself, enough to treat them as such, at least analytically.

Moreover, this does not preclude violence or violent sports. Violence plays a large role in the enjoyment of sports generally (Bryant, Zillmann, & Raney, 1998). Furthermore, fans with higher aesthetic motivation are equally likely to enjoy a violent sport and a nonviolent sport (Wann & Wilson, 1999). The relationship between art and violence in general has a long history (Armstrong & Tennenhouse, 2014) and is interwoven in the field of television (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006), film (Bruder, 2003), and music (Herd, 2009). Attempts to develop an understanding of violence as artful are abundant in the cultural world of combat sports. An important example, which parallels MMA in many ways, is the ‘craft’ of pugilism. It is not uncommon to hear discussions about the art or beauty of boxing. In literature, Joyce Carol Oates wrote her famous essay *On Boxing*, and Norman Mailer’s *The Fight* captured the “rumble in the jungle” between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman. In film, boxing movies like *Rocky*, *Million Dollar Baby*, and *Raging Bull* garnered both critical acclaim and academy awards. These various forms of artistic representation have served to highlight its aesthetic and symbolic importance, as well as making “the aesthetic transformation of violence through boxing...readily apparent (Scott, 2008, p. xxxi). Indeed, boxing is no longer seen as a ‘blood sport’, but rather a ‘bodily craft’, a Durkheimian ‘social art’, a ‘sweet science’ (Wacquant, 1992, 2004). Unlike MMA which exemplifies an ‘internal legitimacy’ (Baumann, 2007) operating within a small community of connoisseurs and core actors, boxing is ‘externally legitimate’ in respect to the general public. Thus, while the legitimacy of the craft of boxing is almost taken for granted, for those outside this sphere of ‘internal legitimacy’ of MMA, treating violence as an artistic and aesthetic endeavor may strike them as counterintuitive, offensive, or even morally wrong.

1. The sociocultural context of MMA

MMA is an unarmed combat sport that allows for the use of techniques from many martial arts disciplines – both striking and grappling – within a set of Unified Rules and commission specific rules.² This means for example, that submission holds³ from Jiu Jitsu, kneeling techniques from Muay Thai, take-downs from Greco-Roman wrestling, and upper-cuts from boxing can all be used in an MMA fight.⁴ In this sense it is almost the embodiment of a globalized sport, combining elements from geographically and historically disparate traditions. Fights happen within specific weight classes, and the paths to victory are numerous: knockout or technical knockout, submission, judge’s decisions, or referee stoppage.⁵ The leading organization of MMA, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) holds fights within a caged octagon, rather than a traditional square-shaped ring. The first sanctioned MMA fight was held in 1993 (at the time called ‘no holds barred’) and featured very minimal rules.

MMA’s history is interwoven with moral, political, and behavioral concerns. In 1994, during the early ‘no holds barred’ days of the UFC, Senator John McCain (US Congress, 1994) spoke at a congressional hearing on health and safety and addressed MMA directly: “[...] recently there has been a phenomenon which has arisen in America, and I do not call it a sport, this tough man-style, no-holds

¹ Ironically, just before the publication of this article, the actress Meryl Streep made an impassioned political speech at the Golden Globes, in which she stated that “Hollywood is crawling with outsiders and foreigners, and if we kick them all out, you’ll have nothing to watch but football and mixed-martial arts, which arts, *which are not the arts*” (emphasis in original). This elicited a strong response from several prominent MMA media members, who generally argued that (1) MMA is an ethnically diverse sport, and (2) that MMA is indeed an art form.

² Each State in the U.S has a specific athletic commission, who may require specific/distinct rules outside the Unified Rules.

³ Submissions are particular holds or techniques that force the opponent to give up or ‘submit’ due to intense pain or fear of injury.

⁴ The word ‘fight’ is used because it reflects the usage of MMA media in the data collected. However, within the MMA community, some frown upon the term, and prefer terms like ‘contest’ or ‘match’. This is to reflect that MMA is in essence two individuals testing their skills and techniques against one another.

⁵ In MMA, referees hold a reasonable amount of discretion in decided when a fight should end. Large cuts obstructing the vision of fighters, and fighters who appear unable to defend themselves against the attacks of their opponent, are common instances in which referees intervene in this fashion.

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