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Bruce Lee died in July 1973, just days before the release of Enter the Dragon, the film that would catapult him to global fame. After 45 years of enduring fame, the Martial Arts Studies Research Network paused to reflect on his media and martial legacies in its fourth annual conference, titled 'Bruce Lee’s Cultural Legacies', which was held at Cardiff University, UK, on 11-12 July 2018.

This conference sought to explore and assess the impacts, effects and consequences of the images and ideas of and around Bruce Lee’s films, TV programmes, writings, teachings and practices. The focus of the conference was not solely on his films and writings in isolation, but rather on their impact in such contexts as martial arts, popular culture, physical culture, philosophy, filmmaking, fight choreography, and so on.

For this special issue of Martial Arts Studies, we sought to present a selection of the works that focused in particular on Bruce Lee’s martial legacies, as well as some broader ruminations on the potential significance of Bruce Lee in a variety of academic and popular contexts. The first article in this special issue, titled ‘Bruce Lee and the Perfection of Martial Arts (Studies): An Exercise in Alterdisciplinarity’, features an investigation conducted by Kyle Barrowman into the philosophical legacy of Bruce Lee’s epochal essay ‘Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate’. Whereas scholars have historically focused on Lee’s inheritance of Eastern philosophy, Barrowman brings to light much of what has been missed as a result of this narrow focus in relation to Lee’s affinities with Western philosophical traditions. In particular, Barrowman takes the baton from the late Stanley Cavell, who identified in the history of Western philosophy a tradition of perfectionism, and argues that Lee’s philosophical enterprise vis-à-vis jeet kune do is resoundingly
perfectionist. Furthermore, Barrowman strives to demonstrate the probative value of perfectionist philosophy not merely in the realm of martial arts, but also in the realm of martial arts studies, arguing against some of the prevailing tendencies in academic scholarship generally and martial arts studies scholarship specifically. Ultimately, Barrowman implores the many practitioner-scholars in martial arts studies to take to heart Lee's perfectionist lessons both in their training and in their scholarship.

In the next article, titled 'Fighting Over Bruce Lee', Paul Bowman provides a critical response to Barrowman’s call to the martial arts studies community. Playing the matador to Barrowman’s bull, Bowman looks to evade the force of Barrowman’s charges and resituate the conversations to be had – about Bruce Lee, martial arts, and martial arts studies – on decidedly non-perfectionist ground. Contrary to Barrowman’s position on the need to fundamentally alter academic scholarship generally and martial arts studies scholarship specifically, Bowman rearticulates the major premises that have long informed work in cultural studies and his work on Bruce Lee in an effort to showcase the enduring productivity of poststructuralist-informed scholarship. In the process, Bowman takes up the issues both implicit and explicit in Barrowman’s contribution and offers his own take on the current status of martial arts studies, the potential future developments that we should – and should not – encourage as a field, and the value of continuing to study the many legacies of Bruce Lee in the contexts of martial arts, philosophy, and even politics.

Switching gears, the third contribution to this special issue, titled 'From the Dragon to the Beast: The Martial Monk and Virtual Ninja as Actual Martial Artists', is an edited selection of a chapter from Chris Goto-Jones’ provocative entry in the Martial Arts Studies Book Series, *The Virtual Ninja Manifesto* (2016), in which he discusses the Badiouian ‘event’ status of Bruce Lee’s emergence as a popular culture icon alongside the similarly ‘evental’ gaming moment known as the ‘Beast Event’. By virtue of an insightful trek through gaming history, Goto-Jones elucidates the martial components involved in the playing of martial arts video games, or MAVs. Focusing in particular on the 57-second gameplay sequence in the final round of the first match of the semi-final of the *Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike* (1999) competition at the Evolution World Championships 2004 in Pomona, California, in which Umehara Daigo staged a spectacular comeback victory and cemented his gaming legacy, Goto-Jones highlights the ways – culturally, ideologically, ethically, combatively – that the ‘Beast Event’ and the ‘Bruce Lee Event’, while participating in a transnational discursive space that features the martial arts (as practice, representation, simulation, simulacrum, and fantasy), seem also to represent markers in a sequential (or at least an episodic) cultural narrative about the significance and meaning of the martial arts in contemporary societies.

Taking a historical turn, in his article entitled ‘Bruce Lee and the Invention of Jeet Kune Do: The Theory of Martial Creation’, George Jennings explores the sociopolitical, psychological and physical prerequisites to creating a martial art. Using Bruce Lee’s creation of jeet kune do as his primary case study, Jennings identifies the key components in Lee’s creation of jeet kune do – chief among which is the
fact that creativity in martial arts is almost invariably linked to moments of crisis – and looks for the same components in the creative efforts of other iconoclasts before and after Lee. Going from Bruce Lee and his creation of jeet kune do back to Edward W. Barton-Wright’s creation of bartitsu and up to Marisela Ugalde’s creation of xilam, Jennings highlights the specific ways in which all three of these founders took personal and social crises as stimulus for creativity. Combining his historical analyses with insights from sociology and philosophy, Jennings offers a unique conception of creativity in martial arts as well as a new lens through which to view Lee and his art of jeet kune do.

Finally, in his article entitled ‘Timing in Bruce Lee’s Writings as Inspiration for Listening Musically to Hand Combat and Martial Arts Performance’, Colin P. McGuire takes a musical trek through the combat philosophy outlined in Lee’s *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*. In an effort to understand more thoroughly Lee’s thoughts on rhythm and timing, and in particular to more coherently elucidate Lee’s key combative concept of broken rhythm, McGuire eschews text-based methodologies and endeavours to listen to rather than ‘read’ Lee’s work. In the process, McGuire aims to clarify/correct some of Lee’s musical terminology so as to better grasp the rhythmic components of jeet kune do and martial arts more broadly; additionally, McGuire challenges Lee’s dismissal of forms training on musical grounds and demonstrates, with reference to fieldwork conducted at a Chinese-Canadian kung fu club, the potential combative utility in training percussion-driven choreographed forms, which has been overlooked by many martial arts scholars and practitioners, including Lee himself.

In addition to our feature articles, this issue of *Martial Arts Studies* also contains a conference report and a book review. In their review of the ‘Bruce Lee’s Cultural Legacies’ conference, Xiujie Ma and Zizheng Yu offer their perspectives on all of the presentations delivered at the conference. From conference organizers Paul Bowman and Kyle Barrowman, to keynotes Matthew Polly and Li Siu Leung, to martial arts studies regulars Luke White and Wayne Wong, to martial arts studies newcomers Glen Mimura, Eric Pellerin and many more, Ma and Yu provide insightful remarks on the presenters and the ideas that they presented as well as encouraging thoughts on the future of martial arts studies and the enduring interest in the many legacies of Bruce Lee.

Alex Channon, meanwhile, offers an astute analysis of Janet O’Shea’s recently published book, *Risk, Failure, Play: What Dance Reveals about Martial Arts Training* (Oxford University Press, 2019). Not only does Channon explicate the main concepts and arguments utilized and promulgated by O’Shea, he also identifies the productive avenues opened up by O’Shea’s work, applies pressure to some of her formulations, and offers provocations to the wider martial arts studies community pertaining to some of the bigger issues at play throughout O’Shea’s text. Ultimately, Channon argues, *Risk, Failure, Play* offers a compelling discussion of the social value of combat sports and makes an important contribution to the ever-growing field of martial arts studies, and he encourages scholars to take up the many subjects touched on by O’Shea and continue down the paths opened up and travelled by O’Shea in her text.
Though inspired by and largely revolving around Bruce Lee and his many (equally celebrated and contested) legacies, it is fitting that this special issue ends with an eye towards the future of martial arts studies. For, even as our feature contributors look back through history to the time in which Lee lived, the work that he made during his life, and the evolution of his martial arts practice throughout his life, each article finds in the legacies of Bruce Lee ideas, issues, and practices still worth thinking about – whether for the first time or from a new angle. If this issue is a testament to the vibrant scholarship currently being conducted in martial arts studies, it is equally a testament to the lasting influence of Bruce Lee on all martial arts discourses, be it as a provocateur or a muse, inspiration or challenge, ideal or cautionary tale. While there is, of course, far more that can – and should – be said about Bruce Lee in the context of martial arts studies, we hope that this issue provides scholars and practitioners alike with insightful and innovative ways of approaching the pasts and futures of both Bruce Lee and martial arts studies.
Bruce Lee and the Perfection of Martial Arts (Studies): An Exercise in Alterdisciplinarity

Kyle Barrowman

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Bruce Lee, jeet kune do, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ayn Rand, Stanley Cavell, Objectivism, Perfectionism, Poststructuralism, Alterdisciplinarity

Citation

Abstract
This essay builds from an analysis of the philosophical underpinnings of Bruce Lee’s jeet kune do to an analysis of the current state of academic scholarship generally and martial arts studies scholarship specifically. For the sake of a more comprehensive understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of jeet kune do, and in particular its affinities with a philosophical tradition traced by Stanley Cavell under the heading of perfectionism, this essay brings the philosophical writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Ayn Rand into contact with Lee’s writings during the time that he spent formulating his martial arts philosophy. Additionally, this essay uses the philosophical insights of Emerson, Rand, and Lee to challenge longstanding academic dogma vis-à-vis poststructuralist philosophy, the methods of academic intervention, and the nature of philosophical argumentation. Though pitched as a debate regarding the content and the status of Bruce Lee and his combative philosophy, this essay endeavors to inspire scholars to (re)examine their conceptions of Bruce Lee, martial arts, and martial arts studies.
INTRODUCTION

An Angel came to me and said, ‘O pitiable foolish young man! O horrible! O dreadful state! Consider the hot burning dungeon thou art preparing for thyself to all eternity, to which thou art going in such career’. I said, ‘Perhaps you will be willing to shew me my eternal lot & we will contemplate together upon it and see whether your lot or mine is most desirable’ … The Angel said: ‘Thy phantasy has imposed upon me & thou oughtest to be ashamed’. I answer’d: ‘We impose on one another’ … Opposition is true Friendship.


Following the ‘Bruce Lee’s Cultural Legacies’ conference which occasioned this special issue of Martial Arts Studies (organized by myself and Paul Bowman and held at Cardiff University in July 2018), Luke White provided a conference report to *Kung Fu Tea* in which he observed how the Bruce Lees, plural, that emerged over the course of the conference, in the different contexts of the many fascinating presentations from scholars coming from myriad disciplinary positions and perspectives, were ‘multiple and in many ways contradictory’. On this proliferation of Bruce Lees, White elaborated:

Lee remains an enigma. Was he a plagiarist or a genius? Does he belong to Chinese or Western culture? Does he offer us emancipatory or conservative images of masculinity or ethnicity? Did his films change or reinforce the ways East Asia had been imagined in America and Europe? Does he exemplify cosmopolitan mixture or ethnic specificity? Was he an entrepreneurial individualist fighting his way to the top of a competitive marketplace for celebrity, or is he a countercultural ‘Third World Warrior’? Was he the martial artist who died away with ‘classical mess’, or an expert whose brilliance was built on thousands of hours of traditional form practice during his early studies? … In this regard, Lee has taken on for fans and interpreters alike something of the quality of scripture, which is always, of course, selectively read. [White 2018]

As near as I can tell, the question there about whether or not Bruce Lee was an ‘individualist fighting his way to the top’ has as its reference point my presentation at the conference, which was entitled ‘Dragon Seeks Path: Bruce Lee and the Way of Perfectionism’ [Barrowman 2018a]. As described by White, my presentation was ‘striking’ not merely for the way that it endeavored to steer the conversations to be had about Bruce Lee ‘away from the concerns of the left-liberal scholarship that dominates academia generally and academic investigations of Bruce Lee specifically, but, more pointedly, for the way that it ‘problematize[d] the “countercultural” Bruce Lee in whom many [fans and scholars] are invested’ [White 2018]. Indeed, as I stated very clearly at the start of my presentation, my overriding intention was to steer the conversations to be had about Bruce Lee and his many legacies into what I hoped would be unfamiliar and uncharted territory – and not merely for novelty’s sake, but precisely as a corrective to the selective reading problem rightly identified by White.

The specific territory into which I took my presentation was the philosophical territory that Stanley Cavell spent the latter portion of his career exploring and to which he gave the name *perfectionism*.1 As traced by Cavell, the perfectionist lineage runs throughout the history of Western philosophy, from Plato and Aristotle through John Locke and John Stuart Mill all the way up through (most saliently for Cavell) Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau [see Cavell 2004]. In my own work, I have added to this list Ayn Rand and her philosophy of Objectivism [see Barrowman 2017; 2018a; 2018b; 2018c; 2018d]. Obviously, for academics invested in left-liberal (to say nothing of Marxist/communist/socialist) ideal(1)s, the very mention of Rand, if not also Emerson, will set off any number of alarm bells for any number of reasons.2 While it is worth having conversations about how and why mentioning Rand and/or Emerson sets off so many academic alarm

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1 For more elaborate discussions of the concept and the lineage of perfectionism, see Cavell [1972/1981; 1989; 1990; 2003; 2004; 2005].

2 Relevant to this point is an observation once made by the American political commentator Ben Shapiro, who rightly observed the sad fact that, in any given university course, the chances are that, if you want to do well in the course, citing Ayn Rand probably [will not be] the best strategy [Shapiro 2013: 30]; in a similar vein, on an episode of the political talk show *The Rubin Report* for which Dave Rubin had on as his guest Yaron Brook, the present Chairman of the Board at the Ayn Rand Institute, Rubin observed how ‘just by saying “Ayn Rand” a certain percentage of people go bonkers’ [Rubin in Rubin and Brook 2016]. Speaking from personal experience, devoting a PhD to Rand’s philosophy of Objectivism was not without its hurdles, including being told at one point very straightforwardly by a remarkably uninformed academic that it seemed to him that using ‘her “philosophy” (and I purposely use inverted commas here) is … akin to using the statements of, say, Woody Allen or Jerry Bruckheimer as [one’s philosophical] bedrock’. These sentiments reflect what might be called the ‘reception’ of Rand in academia, though I think that ‘repression’ would be more accurate. Yet, what I find most interesting about this is how, in the responses (as ignorant as they are vitriolic) with which the mere mention of Ayn Rand tends to be met, this academic repression of Rand replicates that which Cavell found with respect to what he diagnosed as the longstanding academic repression of Emerson. To Cavell’s mind vis-à-vis Emerson – and I would argue that the same holds true vis-à-vis Rand – ‘it does not follow from [Emerson’s and Rand’s] institutionalized silencing that [they] failed to raise the call for philosophy’, on the contrary, ‘the fact of [their] call’s repression would be the sign that it has been heard’ [Cavell 1995: 210].
bells, the important question to ask in the present context has nothing to do with politics, at least not principally. Rather, it has to do with Bruce Lee, and it can be formulated as follows: Can one actually make a plausible case for Bruce Lee’s philosophical writings having a profound affinity with the philosophical writings of such arch-individualists as Emerson and Rand?

In my presentation, I tried to make such a case with reference to Lee’s film work, and to The Way of the Dragon (1972) in particular [Barrowman 2018a]. In this essay, I will try to make the case with reference to Lee’s martial arts writings, and to his articulation of the principles of jeet kune do in ‘Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate’ [1971a] in particular. In the course of making my case for a perfectionist Bruce Lee, I will have occasion to confront ‘another’ Bruce Lee, namely the one who emerges in the groundbreaking work of Paul Bowman. Ahead of this confrontation, I would like to acknowledge the uniqueness of my position and the dilemma with which I am presented, which, having in mind Jacques Derrida’s critique of Michel Foucault, I will refer to as the disciiple’s dilemma:

Having formerly had the good fortune to study under Michel Foucault, I retain the consciousness of an admiring and grateful disciple. Now, the disciple’s consciousness, when he starts, I would not say to dispute, but to engage in dialogue with, the master, or, better, to articulate the interminable and silent dialogue which made him into a disciple – this disciple’s consciousness is an unhappy consciousness. Starting to enter into dialogue in the world, that is, starting to answer back, he always feels ‘caught in the act’, like the ‘infant’ who, by definition and as his name indicates, cannot speak and above all must not answer back. And when, as is the case here, the dialogue is in danger of being taken – incorrectly – as a challenge, the disciple knows that he alone finds himself already challenged by the master’s voice within him that precedes his own … The disciple must break the glass, or, better, the mirror, the reflection, his infinite speculation on the master. And start to speak.

[Derrida 1964: 36-37]

Having spent the better part of a decade in a virtual dialogue with Bowman via his writings on Bruce Lee – not to mention three years in an actual dialogue with Bowman as my PhD supervisor at Cardiff University – that to which Derrida is here giving voice is relevant insofar as I do retain the consciousness of an admiring and grateful disciple and have for many years been equally inspired and challenged by Bowman’s voice within me as I have thought about and written about Bruce Lee. However, I must distinguish my own dilemma from Derrida’s in two important ways. First, unlike Derrida, speaking does not frighten me, nor do I think that it should be conceived of as frightening [Derrida 1963: 9; cf. Barrowman 2017: 168-182, esp. 175-176]. Second, the virtual and actual dialogues into which I have entered with Bowman and his work absolutely take the form of, and are intended to be, a challenge, though, importantly, a challenge to myself as much as, if not more than, anyone else, Bowman included.

Across multiple publications, I have encouraged scholars – in light of what I will demonstrate over the course of this essay is the fundamental philosophical gesture of jeet kune do – to conceive of scholarly discussions as confrontations in which, in addition to confronting an interlocutor, scholars are also confronting themselves, in which they are subjecting to scrutiny their own potentially longstanding, even cherished, premises and presuppositions [see Barrowman 2012; 2013a; 2013b; 2014a; 2015; 2017; 2018b; 2018c; 2018d; 2019a].

In keeping with this theme, my challenge in this essay will be to argue for what I have conceived of as a perfectionist Bruce Lee over and against that which Bowman has conceived of as a poststructuralist Bruce Lee, but to do so with respect as the foundation, honesty as the touchstone, and (self-)knowledge as the goal of the confrontation. With any luck, this confrontation may serve to exemplify not only a responsible investigation of the philosophical underpinnings of jeet

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3 To date, all my dealings with Bruce Lee have also featured dealings with Bowman’s work on Lee [Barrowman 2012; 2013b; 2014a; 2014b]. Though he is often my whipping boy of choice, this should not imply my harboring towards Bowman any sort of hostility or antipathy. On the contrary, my relationship with Bowman’s work is akin to the relationship Noël Carroll confessed to having with the work of Monroe Beardsley: ‘My use of Monroe Beardsley … as my leading foil also shows the influence of George Dickie, since it was Dickie who taught me always to consult Beardsley’s work for the most worked-out and authoritative position on any subject in aesthetics, even if, in the end, I wound up criticizing it. There are more ways than one to stand on the shoulders of giants’ [Carroll 2001: 2]. Analogously, I always find myself consulting Bowman’s work for the most worked-out and authoritative positions on any subject pertaining to Bruce Lee, even if, in the end, I often wind up criticizing it.

4 As the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget observed: ‘Anyone who thinks for himself exclusively and is consequently in a perpetual state of belief, i.e. of confidence in his own ideas, will naturally not trouble himself about the reasons and motives which have guided his reasoning process. Only under the pressure of argument and opposition will he seek to justify himself in the eyes of others and thus acquire the habit of watching himself think, i.e. of constantly detecting the motives which are guiding him in the direction he is pursuing’ [Piaget 1928/2002: 137].

Born of twin dissatisfactions – first, dissatisfaction with the ossified conception of ‘critique’ that he identified as subtending most work done in the humanities and the social sciences, and second, dissatisfaction with cultural studies and the inability of its scholars to supplant the ossified conception of critique with a new mode of intervention that was sounder epistemologically, superior ethnically, and more effective politically – the concept of alterdisciplinarity signals the need for checks and balances at the institutional level to guard against the pathologizing of hierarchies and for relentlessly honest introspection at the individual level to guard against the sedimentation of dogma. This is the ‘inward’ direction of alterdisciplinarity; it is Bowman encouraging scholars to look inward and, on both institutional and individual levels, ‘to re-examine and to be prepared to retheorise … in order to try to avoid becoming dogmatic stalwarts’ [Bowman 2008a: 95].

The lion’s share of Bowman’s attention, however, is devoted to the ‘outward’ direction of alterdisciplinarity. Insofar as ‘the academic “condition”’ is one of unavoidably heterogeneous language games in a web of disciplinary differences which have produced ‘disciplinary enclaving, mutual unintelligibility, and disarticulation’ [Bowman 2008a: 93], the issue with which scholars who are keen to affect change in academia are faced is ‘one of establishing the conditions of possibility for intervention into’ a given disciplinary space. In other words, it is one of establishing how a given scholar, from ‘outside’, can get on the ‘inside’ of a given disciplinary space and, once inside, navigate the ‘foreign’ language games therein to affect real and lasting change [Bowman 2008a: 105].

To his credit, even though he acknowledges that no alterdisciplinary endeavor ‘will [ever] be easy’ [Bowman 2008a: 105], in addition to articulating the goal of alterdisciplinarity, Bowman also outlines the means of achieving it. Emphatically, Bowman stresses the need to reject the ‘narcissistically assumed relation’ between calling for change and actually enacting change. As he soberly avers, ‘calls can fall on deaf ears, be drowned out, unheard, misunderstood, ridiculed, or ignored’ [Bowman 2008a: 99; see also McQuillan 2001]. What emerges in the place of such narcissism is something like what Cavell would have called a ‘claim to community’.6 Given the depth of his insights and their importance, I will quote Bowman’s own words on what constitutes alterdisciplinarity and how to properly conceptualize alterdisciplinary intervention before proceeding further:

1. Rather than critique from a distance (‘we here’ critiquing ‘them there’), perhaps it would be better to move in, close the gap, and join with the other … Whether carried out in the pages of cultural studies journals or in broadsheets or on high-brow talkshows, critique does not change the status of those involved from simply being dismissable as busy-bodies, from elsewhere, busy-bodies that do not matter. Instead of this, my suggestion is that what ‘we’ now need to overcome is precisely the compulsion to repeat the gesture of critiquing the other (as other) – and that we need to do this with the aim of inventing a [new] kind of critique … The aim, [in other words], is to intervene directly, ‘there’ – namely, within the very academic contexts wherein ‘that’ knowledge is produced.

6 I have in mind here the following passage from Cavell: ‘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 [for] the wish and search for community is the wish and search for reason’ [Cavell 1979: 20; see also Barrowman 2015; 2016b: 199-203].
Bowman’s articulation of alterdisciplinarity is commendable on multiple counts. Not only is his conception admirable, the clarity and the strength of his convictions are expressed brilliantly and persuasively. This is not to imply, however, that there are no problems attendant to the notion/practice of alterdisciplinarity. On the contrary, there are several problems that jump out immediately.

First and foremost, Bowman’s conception of alterdisciplinarity is optimistic to the point of naivete; it necessarily assumes on the parts of journal editors, editorial boards, publishers, etc., an honorable willingness to welcome all voices and all arguments with no regard for their own (real or imagined) institutional/ideological legitimacy. There are any number of instances ready to hand capable of bursting this bubble. To take an example from the history of my ‘home base’ discipline of film studies, I can recall the controversy subsequent to Noël Carroll’s publication of Mystifying Movies: Fads & Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory [1988]. Carroll’s book featured extensive and powerful critiques of Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva, among others, as well as the theoretical orthodoxy based on their work which was instituted primarily through the efforts of the influential British film journal Screen and which was often referred to as ‘Screen Theory’. Upon its publication, Screen published a thoroughgoing refutation of the ideas and arguments in Mystifying Movies written by Warren Buckland [1989], yet they refused to publish a response from Carroll in defense of his ideas and arguments. As Carroll ended up writing in his response, which was ultimately published in the Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism, ‘whether Screen rejected [his response] as a result of a judgment that it [did] not sufficiently address significant methodological issues or as an attempt to repress alternative voices in the predictably Stalinist manner of Lysenko is a question for the reader to resolve’ [Carroll 1992: 199].

In short, Bowman underestimates the machinations of academic institutions to the detriment of his conception of alterdisciplinarity. But we can table the issue of publication politics for the time being – especially since martial arts studies has admirably operated with the academic equivalent of an open-door policy, welcoming and encouraging virtually all scholarship provided that it features a genuine engagement with the problems and possibilities of the field.

An even deeper and more pressing problem is traceable to the idea, expressed by Derrida and quoted by Bowman, that ‘there is no metalanguage, no locus of truth outside of a given field, no absolute and ahistorical overhang; and this absence of overhang – in other words, the radical historicity of [any given] field – makes [every] field necessarily subject to multiplicity and heterogeneity’ [Derrida 1997/2001: 12; cf. Bowman 2008a: 96]. I have called the argument that logically follows the postulation that there is no metalanguage the paradigm subjectivity argument and I have critiqued it extensively elsewhere [see Barrowman 2018b: 176-177; 2019a: 20-21]. I will have occasion later in this essay to return to the paradigm subjectivity argument, but I am bringing it up here because it is a key component in Bowman’s articulation of alterdisciplinarity, and the effect that it has on the coherence of his argument provides a useful initial example of how all arguments rooted in poststructuralism inevitably terminate at a logical dead end.

Since two of the fundamental presuppositions of poststructuralism are that the concept of objectivity is an illusion and that the corollary concept of truth is a ‘metaphysical’ (in the pejorative Derridean sense of the term) concept deployed exclusively by repressive power regimes, ideologically nefarious ‘scientific’ (or ‘pseudo-scientific’, or ‘scientistic’, or what have you) discourses keen to ‘hegemonize’ knowledge, etc. [cf. Bowman 2007: 10-25], there obviously cannot be a metalanguage, there cannot be a locus of truth outside of a given field, for, if there were, if it were possible for two people from different disciplines informed by different paradigms to effectively communicate their apprehensions of reality and correctly determine their objective validity or lack thereof, then the wheels of poststructuralism would instantly grind
to a halt. Moreover, since another fundamental presupposition of poststructuralism is that, at bottom, the motive force which subtends existence is power, any and every field is encumbered by an ‘irreducible polemos’, and ‘those who are inscribed in [a given] field are necessarily inscribed in a polemos’ [Derrida 1997/2001: 12]. Yet, for a final turn of the screw, another key component in Bowman’s articulation of alterdisciplinarity is the postulation that alterdisciplinary interventions ‘will be all the better the further [they are] from appearing to be polemical denunciation’ [Bowman 2008a: 105; see also Bowman 2007: 79–80].

Try as he might, Bowman cannot have his alterdisciplinary cake and eat it. Something has got to give: Either all (inter/alter)disciplinary endeavors are necessarily/irreducibly/inextricably inscribed in polemos, per Derrida, which means that it is not possible for an (inter/alter) disciplinary intervention to take the form of anything other than polemical warfare, or all (inter/alter)disciplinary endeavors are not necessarily/irreducibly/inextricably inscribed in polemos, which means that it is possible for an (inter/alter)disciplinary intervention to take the form of something other than polemical warfare.

The question is: Can Bowman refute a claim made by Derrida? This is a frequent problem for poststructuralists. To the extent that the writings of such authorities as Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, etc., are treated like Holy Scripture, poststructuralists are as a rule incapable of refuting the claims or revising the arguments of their chosen deities.7 Worse still, even if Bowman were able to simply and straightforwardly reject Derrida’s position on (inter/alter)disciplinary activity as necessarily/irreducibly/inextricably polemical, there is still the metalanguage problem. If there is no metalanguage, if there is no locus of truth beyond the confines of a particular discipline to which scholars, both disciplinary insiders and outsiders alike, can refer, then all that remains is polemos.

In sum, Bowman is damned if he does and damned if he doesn’t. Once again, something has got to give: Either there is a locus of truth beyond the confines of a particular discipline to which scholars, both disciplinary insiders and outsiders alike, can refer, thereby grounding (inter/alter)disciplinary discussion and obviating the need for polemics, or there is not a locus of truth beyond the confines of a particular discipline to which scholars, both disciplinary insiders and outsiders alike, can refer, which means that all (inter/alter)disciplinary discussion is a groundless Hobbesian war of all against all fueled solely by a quasi-Nietzschean Will to Power.

Near the end of his articulation of alterdisciplinarity, Bowman uses a point made by Wittgenstein – ‘Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and a heretic’ [Wittgenstein 1951/1969: 81e] – to illustrate what happens when discussions across disciplinary divides and paradigm allegiances are initiated in disregard of the principles of alterdisciplinarity. To the extent that Bowman allowed his conception of alterdisciplinarity to be informed – or, more accurately, corrupted – by poststructuralism, the Wittgensteinian scenario of mutual unintelligibility and dismissal is the best possible outcome that he can hope for; the worst possible outcome is all-out Hobbesian war resultant from the perversely Babel-esque communicative confoundment which poststructuralism regards as axiomatic and insuperable.8

To begin to articulate a way out of this poststructuralist deadlock, consider this problematic from the perspective of Rand’s philosophy of Objectivism, which, contra poststructuralism, is predicated on the acknowledgment of objective reality and the existence of a locus of truth beyond the confines of a given discipline:

If a man believes that [issues of right/wrong, good/bad, just/unjust, etc., are merely] matter[s] of arbitrary, subjective choice, [then any and every one of those issues] becomes, for him, an issue of: my feelings or theirs? No bridge, understanding, or communication is possible to him. Reason is the only means of communication among men, and an objectively perceivable reality is their only common frame of reference; when these are invalidated … [then] force becomes men’s only way of dealing with one another. [Rand (1965) 1967: 22–23]

Poststructuralists always bridle when saddled with the charges of promoting relativism and relying on performatrue contradictions to carry off self-refuting arguments – even when their arguments explicitly advocate ‘subvert[ing] the notion of objectivity and challeng[ing] the authority of discourses claiming to be objective’ in light of the (objective?) fact that objectivity is (objectively?) ‘not naturally occurring but is rather something that [must allegedly be] forcefully established’ [Bowman 2007: 20]. But when objectivity is declared an illusion and truth is declared an ideological construct then relativism is the only game left in town and performatrue contradiction is the name of the game.

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7  This phenomenon was pointed up long ago by Robin Wood in the course of a mendiant critique of poststructuralism: ‘It is precisely the phenomenon of unquestioning acceptance – the illusory and misguided search for an oracle who reveals “truth” – that I have always profoundly mistrusted in the [poststructuralist] tradition. … The sense of Divine Revelation … [and] the parade of gods – Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida – has become embarrassing’ [Wood (1988) 1986/2002: 8].

8  To wit, Barthes spoke jubilantly about the ‘pleasure of [a] sanctioned Babel’ [Barthes 1973/1975: 4].
This is why I have argued elsewhere that, in every poststructuralist argument, it is only a matter of time before the poststructuralist in question writes himself into a corner, and that, as a consequence, it is therefore only a matter of time before that same poststructuralist avails himself of the logical fallacies of concept stealing, package dealing, and context dropping in his last-ditch attempts to extricate himself from that corner and slip out the backdoor of his self-refuting argument.9 The first step towards proper alterdisciplinary scholarship, then, is to refuse to countenance performative contradictions or to confer rationality onto self-refuting arguments. To do this, scholars must be able to acknowledge that there is an objectively perceivable reality that serves as our common frame of reference, after which they must be able to acknowledge that we are capable of communicating across disciplinary divides and paradigm allegiances with reference to the locus of truth beyond the confines of our respective disciplines and paradigms. The catch here is that a certain degree of alteration is prerequisite to grasping the fecundity of our respective disciplines and paradigms. The veracity of these claims will be borne out in the following two sections.

Perfectionism in the History of Philosophy

To say that the number of Bruce Lee biographies and documentaries in existence is staggering would be a considerable understatement. Given Lee’s proliferation over the last half-century across every conceivable print and digital medium, I have no intention in this essay of chronicling Lee’s life and times.11 Instead, I will concern myself exclusively with uncovering the perfectionist ethos at the core of Lee’s philosophical enterprise. As many biographers and scholars have observed, much of Lee’s philosophical efforts consisted of working his way through the ideas of famous thinkers, from Plato and Descartes to Carl Rogers and Alan Watts, as well as ideas from Taoism and...
Confucianism to Buddhism and Zen. In extant philosophical exegeses of Lee’s writings, his indebtedness to Eastern philosophy has been the primary area of focus for biographers and scholars alike. As a corrective to this overemphasis on Lee’s inheritance of Eastern philosophy, I would like to balance the philosophical scales a bit and focus on Lee’s affinities with Western philosophy, in particular on his position in a long line of perfectionist philosophers.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, Cavell has traced a perfectionist lineage that spans the history of Western philosophy. Though Cavell considers Plato’s Republic to be the first real ‘portrait’ of perfectionism [Cavell 2004: 317], it was Aristotle who articulated, explicitly and comprehensively, the first proper philosophy of perfectionism. With reference to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Cavell asks, ‘Who could put the general issue of perfectionism more strongly, or with deeper reference to what is central in philosophizing at large, than Aristotle’s saying “we are in so far as we are actualized, since we are in so far as we live and act?”’ [Cavell 2004: 352]; as he expounds, ‘Aristotle emphasizes himself, this individual, the development of my character, as the touchstone of goodness and rightness – so forcefully and continuously that some [such as, most notably and pertinent in the present context, Rand] have found his theory to be an ethics of selfishness’ [Cavell 2004: 357; see also Rand 1964]. Elsewhere, I have posited an essential connection between Rand’s (primarily Aristotelian) conception of perfectionism and Cavell’s (primarily Emersonian) conception of perfectionism [e.g. Barrowman 2018a; 2018b]. That connection is discernible here, on this point regarding the importance in perfectionist philosophy of individualism, of self-reliance, and of self-actualization in the quest for, in Emerson’s phrasing, one’s ‘unattained but attainable self’ [Emerson 1841a: 125].

Emerson, of course, was vociferous in his emphasis on self-reliance and the sovereignty of the individual. In a distinctly Aristotelian register vis-à-vis the development of one’s self as one’s empyrean task, Emerson proclaimed:

_Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion … I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me. I would write on the lintels of the doorpost – Whim. I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation._

[Emerson 1841b: 148-149]

Another interesting Aristotelian notion evident in Emerson’s work is the notion of character. Cavell observes that, for Aristotle, it is ‘as if each thing that exists is striving to become what it is, to realize itself’ [Cavell 2004: 313]. Emerson glosses this idea in the following manner:

_A character is like an acrostic or an Alexandrian stanza; read it forward, backward, or across, it still spells the same thing … Let me record day by day my honest thought without prospect or retrospect, and, I cannot doubt, it will be found symmetrical,\[14\]_
though I mean it not and see it not … [for] character teaches above our wills. Men imagine that they communicate their virtue or vice only by overt actions, and do not see that virtue or vice emit a breath every moment. [Emerson 1841b: 152]

This is, like much of Emerson’s writing, a deceptively dense passage that requires a bit of unpacking. It may appear that Emerson considers each individual fated to a given character from which he cannot escape and which he is powerless to change. By and large, because certain people ‘do not see that virtue or vice emit a breath every moment’ – that is to say, because certain people delude themselves into believing that they are capable of pulling a fast one on reality and of getting away with being irrational, immoral, weak, (self-)destructive, etc. – it may seem as if they are fated to a given character. Due to this grave error, such people will never so much as begin the work of changing their character. Emerson articulates the way out of this deadlock in his felicitously-titled essay ‘Fate’:

Forever well up the impulse of choosing and acting in the soul. Intellect annuls fate. So far as a man thinks, he is free … ‘Tis weak and vicious people who cast the blame on Fate … ‘Tis the best use of Fate to teach a fatal courage. Go face the fire at sea, or the cholera in your friend’s house, or the burglar in your own, or what danger lies in the way of duty, knowing you are guarded by the cherubim of Destiny. If you believe in Fate to your harm, believe it [instead] for your good. [Emerson 1860: 27-29]17

Far from condemning people to their lot in life – and thereby absolving people of their responsibility to actualize themselves and seek their unattained but attainable selves – Emerson encourages a perspectival shift from pessimism to optimism according to which what human beings are ‘fated’ to do, if we are ‘fated’ to do anything, is to commit ourselves to being as intelligent and as virtuous as we can possibly be.18

In philosophical terms, this is merely one of the many remarkable affinities between Rand and Emerson; however, despite their many affinities, Objectivists would likely bristle at this pairing given Rand’s professed antipathy towards Emerson. In addition to unpacking Emerson’s position on self-reliance and self-actualization and demonstrating its many affinities with Objectivism, I must also right a longstanding wrong within Objectivist circles vis-à-vis Emerson the source of which is Rand herself. Over the course of a denunciation of a number of what she found to be deleterious philosophical notions polluting ordinary life, Rand referred to Emerson’s line in ‘Self-Reliance’ about how ‘consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds’ [Emerson 1841b: 152] and denounced Emerson as ‘a very little mind’ [Rand 1974a: 5].19

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today … There will be an agreement in whatever variety of actions, so they be each honest and natural in their hour. For of one will, the actions will be harmonious, however unlike they seem. These varieties are lost sight of at a little distance, at a little height of thought. One tendency unites them all. The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks. See the line from a sufficient distance and it straightens itself to the average tendency. Your genuine action will explain itself and will explain your other genuine actions. [Emerson 1841b: 152-153]

15 As Jordan B. Peterson has put it (with reference to Jung): ‘Any internal state of contradiction, unrecognized, will be played out in the world as fate’ [Peterson 1999: 347]. Commenting on this sense of the ‘fatedness’ of character, Rand once recalled a friend’s remark to her to the effect that ‘today’s attitude, paraphrasing the Bible, is: “Forgive me, Father, for I know not what I’m doing…and please don’t tell me”’ [Rand 1960: 59].

16 In a similar, but more sympathetic, vein as the remark of Rand’s friend cited in the previous note, Eric Hoffer, another one of the most profound influences on Lee (indeed, so taken with Hoffer’s writings was Lee that, beyond merely jotting down notes, he would transcribe entire paragraphs from Hoffer’s work verbatim – transcriptions which were then, unfortunately, published as if Lee’s own words, as in, for example, Lee [1975: 205-207] and Little [1999: 240-244]), observed: ‘To become different from what we are, we must have some awareness of what we are. Whether this being different results in dissimulation or a real change of heart, it cannot be realized without self-awareness. Yet, it is remarkable that the very people who are most self-dissatisfied and crave most for a new identity have the least self-awareness. They have turned away from an unwanted self and hence never had a good look at it. The result is that the most dissatisfied can neither dissipulate nor attain a real change of heart’ [Hoffer 1954: 93].

17 As if this quote is not serendipitous enough, I would like to point out that, as detailed by Polly, the infant Lee survived the cholera outbreak that was ‘ravaging’ Hong Kong at the time [Polly 2018: 24].

18 Echoing Emerson on this point, Peterson has poignantly and provocatively asked: ‘What if it was nothing but our self-deceit, our cowardice, hatred, and fear, that pollutes our experience and turns the world into hell? This is a hypothesis, at least – as good as any other, admirable and capable of generating hope. Why can’t we make the experiment, and find out if it is true?’ [Peterson 1999: 469].

19 For an intelligent (though, to my mind, still mistaken) defense of Rand’s denunciation of Emerson, see Richard Lawrence [1999].
It is plainly evident in this passage that Emerson’s problem is not with consistency as such but with foolish consistency. Rand was understandably perturbed by what appeared to be an indifference to, even a welcoming of, contradiction, but she and Emerson were on the same page vis-à-vis self-actualization. When Emerson says ‘let me record day by day my honest thought without prospect or retrospect, and, I cannot doubt, it will be found symmetrical, though I mean it not and see it not’, his point is that concerning oneself with one’s ‘shadow on the wall’ will only hinder one’s progress towards one’s unattained but attainable self, whereas a commitment to self-actualization fueled by ‘genuine action’ will invariably yield a different, higher order consistency. 20 On this point regarding genuine action, Rand is in perfect harmony with Emersonian perfectionism:

Live and act within the limit of your knowledge and keep expanding it to the limit of your life. Redeem your mind from the bookshops of authority. Accept the fact that you are not omniscient, but playing a zombie will not give you omniscience; that your mind is fallible, but becoming mindless will not make you infallible; that an error made on your own is safer than ten truths accepted on faith, because the first leaves you the means to correct it [whereas] the second destroys your capacity to distinguish truth from error. In place of your dream of an omniscient automaton, accept the fact that any knowledge man acquires is acquired by his own will and effort, and that that is his distinction in the universe, that is his nature, his morality, his glory. Discard that unlimited license to evil which consists of claiming that man is imperfect. By what standard do you damn him when you claim it? … Man has a single basic choice – to think or not – and that is the gauge of his virtue. Moral perfection is an unreached rationality – not the degree of your intelligence, but the full and relentless use of your mind; not the extent of your knowledge, but the acceptance of reason as an absolute.

[Rand 1957: 1058-1059]

20 Worth noting here is a certain Jungian homology vis-à-vis the notion of ‘psychic death’ [see Jung 1968, 1991; see also Campbell 1949/2004: 85-88; Peterson 2016: 02:12:52-02:15:15; 2017a: 00:03:28 - 00:06:07; 2017b: 02:14:15-02:17:14], which is profoundly captured in Cavell’s pithy observation that ‘knowledge of the self as it is always takes place in the betrayal of the self as it was’ and that the pain entailed in this process is the reason that the perfectionist path is ‘so rarely taken’ [Cavell 1971/1979: 160; see also Cavell 1990: xxx-xxxi].

PERFECTIONISM AND JEET KUNE DO

Having brought into alignment Rand and Aristotle on the one hand and Cavell and Emerson on the other, thereby establishing the most basic terms of perfectionism, the question that I must now answer is: Where does Bruce Lee stand? In attempting to answer this question, I think that the first point worth making is that the one thing about Lee that has never gone unremarked is his resolute individualism.

Bruce Thomas describes Lee’s philosophy as ‘a fierce philosophy of individualism’ [Thomas 1994/2002: xi] in which Lee insists, in an Emersonian/Randian spirit, that ‘self-mastery should be the goal of all human endeavor’ [Thomas 1994/2002: xii]. Daniele Bolelli argues that, in his formulation of jeet kune do, ‘Lee took the bull of group identity by the horns and challenged the sensibility of the human desire to belong’; ‘too afraid to bear the weight of choosing on their own, many people hide behind the security of a group that provides all the answers. According to Lee, however, this is a way to hide, not a way to live’ [Bolelli 2003/2008: 170-171]. James Bishop puts the point most succinctly when he observes that Lee ‘seemed to be the type for whom the term “individual” was coined’ [Bishop 2004: 1]. Lee himself, in his lifelong commitment to relentless introspection, often gave voice to an unmistakably perfectionist drive. In a letter written in 1962 (to Pearl Tso, his ‘high school sweetheart’ [Polly 2018: 66]), the at-the-time 21-year-old Lee wrote the following:

When you drop a pebble into a pool of water, the pebble starts a series of ripples that expand until they encompass the whole pool. This is exactly what will happen when I give my ideas a definite plan of action. Right now, I can project my thoughts into the future, I can see ahead of me. I dream (remember that practical dreamers never quit). I may now own nothing but a little place down in a basement, but … I am not easily discouraged, readily visualize myself as overcoming obstacles, winning out over setbacks, achieving ‘impossible’ objectives … I feel this great force, this untapped power, this dynamic something within me.

[Lee 1962: 249]

More than a decade later, Lee, reflecting on his journey now on the other side of success, reaffirmed, across a series of journal entries, that, ‘ever since I was a kid, I have possessed within myself this instinctive urge for growth and daily expansion of my potential’ [Lee 1973a: 226]; that, to his mind, ‘the function and duty of a human being – a quality human being, that is … is the sincere and honest development of his potential and “self-actualization”’ [Lee 1973d: 237]; that ‘there is no end or limit to this, because life is simply an ever-going process’ [Lee 1973a: 227]; that he thought that the moral strength required to take
responsibility for one's actions, good and bad, was a strength that every individual must cultivate daily [Lee 1973b: 230]; that, for 'the lazy and hopeless, they can forget it and do what they like', but, for the self-reliant individual willing to shun the lazy and hopeless, he must learn to 'stand on his own two feet and find out his cause of ignorance' [Lee 1973a: 228]; and that, in his personal perfectionist quest, he was able to report a profound sense of accomplishment and fulfillment insofar as he was consistently 'growing, daily and honestly' [Lee 1973e: 238]. In Objectivist terms, this may be described as Lee's perfectionist 

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sense of life; for his perfectionist philosophy of life, the most illuminating source is his essay 'Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate'.

Certainly, the most philosophically sophisticated examinations to date of the terms of Lee's intervention in the discourses of martial arts study and practice have come from Paul Bowman. Given this fact – as well as, of equal importance, the fact that Bowman is a poststructuralist and has tried to make the case that Lee's philosophy has deep affinities with poststructuralism – my engagement with Lee's famous essay will be at once an explication of Lee's philosophy as well as a refutation of Bowman's poststructuralist engagement with it. I will discuss Lee's essay in relation to what I will demonstrate are its two main thrusts: First, a declaration of the sovereignty of the individual supported by a philosophical conception of martial arts study and practice that is resoundingly perfectionist, and second, a critique of 'classical' martial arts study and practice that runs along very similar lines to my own critique of what I have characterized as the paradigm subjectivity argument [Barrowman 2018b: 176-177; 2019a: 20-21].

Regarding the sovereignty of the individual, Lee begins his essay by proclaiming himself to be 'primarily concerned with the blossoming of a martial artist' [Lee 1971a: 25]. Recalling Bolelli's point about how Lee 'took the bull of group identity by the horns' and subjected it to critique, Lee elaborates that his conception of 'a martial artist' is 'not a created individual chosen by the 'horns' and subjected it to critique, Lee elaborates that his conception of 'a martial artist' is 'not a philosophical conception of martial arts study and practice that is resoundingly perfectionist, and second, a critique of 'classical' martial arts study and practice that runs along very similar lines to my own critique of what I have characterized as the paradigm subjectivity argument [Barrowman 2018b: 176-177; 2019a: 20-21].

Right off the bat, it is clear that Lee would have had absolutely zero patience for contemporary identity politics, which, to him, would have represented precisely the type of 'mumbo jumbo' that he rejected as a pathetic 'protective shell' that prevents individuals from realizing directly to the world [Lee 1971a: 25]. In stark opposition to this problematic herd mentality, Lee ends his introduction with a virtual transcription of the creed of the protagonists in Rand's novel Atlas Shrugged (1957): 'I seek neither your approval nor to influence you toward my way of thinking. I will be more than satisfied if, as a result of this article, you begin to investigate everything for yourself and cease to uncritically accept prescribed formulas' [Lee 1971a: 25].

Having thus established his emphasis on the sovereign individual – or, in Lee's own words, on 'man, the creating individual' [Lee 1971a: 25] – Lee moves on to consider the creating individual's relationship to a particular style, or method, of combat. The problem, as Lee sees it, is that the creating individual 'cannot express himself fully' if he is 'imprisoned' by a single style or method. He warns that, 'should your responses become dependent upon any single style or method, you will react in terms of what should be rather than to the reality of the ever-changing what is' [Lee 1971a: 25], and that, should this happen, the creating individual's chosen style or method will become a 'crutch' that limits or blocks [his potential] growth as a martial artist' [Lee 1971a: 25].

23 On this point, Keiko Nitta has observed that, to many biographers and scholars, Lee is shockingly and affrontingly regarded on the contrary as 'the master of identity politics' [Nitta 2010: 379; my emphasis; see also Bowman 2013: 150-153]. It is hard to imagine more damning proof of Bishop's claim that many people 'miss even [Lee's] most obvious lessons' [Bishop 2004: 170].

24 For comparison, the creed of the protagonists in Atlas Shrugged runs as follows: 'I swear – by my life and my love of it – that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine' [Rand 1957: 1069]. Clearly, Lee is here aligned with the Objectivist perspective outlined by Rand in the following terms: 'We do not tell – we show. We do not claim – we prove. It is not your obedience that we seek to win, but your rational conviction. You have seen all the elements of our secret. The conclusion is now yours to draw. We can help you to name it, but not to accept it – the sight, the knowledge, and the acceptance must be yours' [Rand 1957: 735]. For Lee's part, his adoption of this position was likely the result of insights gleaned from the work of Fritz Perls. In an undated journal entry titled 'Notes on Gestalt Therapy', Lee quotes Perls's mantra: 'I do my thing and you do your thing. I am not in this world to live up to your expectations and you are not in this world to live up to mine. You are you and I am I. And if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful; if not, it can't be helped' [Lee n.d.: 72].
Unfortunately, most students in the martial arts are conformists. Instead of learning to depend on themselves... they blindly follow their instructors, no longer feeling alone and finding security in mass imitation. The product of this imitation is a dependent mind. Independent inquiry, which is essential to genuine understanding, is sacrificed. Look around the martial arts [or, in the context of this essay, around academia] and witness the assortment of routine performers, trick artists, desensitized robots, glorifiers of the past, and so on— all followers or exponents of organized despair... The most pitiful sight is to see sincere students earnestly repeating those imitative drills, listening to their own screams and spiritual yells. In most cases, the means... are so elaborate that the students must give tremendous attention to them, until gradually they lose sight of the end. The students end up performing their methodical routines as a mere conditioned response rather than responding to 'what is'. [Lee 1971a: 27]

In another one of his earlier drafts of this essay, Lee added that to think that there exists, much less to try to create, one single style or method capable a priori of dealing with 'the ever-changing’ 'what is’ is ‘pretty much like putting a pound of water into wrapping paper and shaping it, although many futile arguments exist today as to the choice of colors, textures, and so forth, and so on, of the wrapping paper’ [Lee 1971d: 138].

In a similar vein as Lee’s invocation of the ‘crutch’ that ‘limits or blocks’ the freedom of one’s intellectual ‘movement’, Emerson invoked the handkerchief that obstructs one’s vision: A man must consider what a blind-man’s buff is this game of conformity. If I know your sect I anticipate your argument. I hear a preacher announce for his text and topic the expediency of one of the institutions of his church. Do I not know beforehand that not possibly can he say a new and spontaneous word? Do I not know that with all this ostentation of examining the grounds of the institution he will do no such thing? Do I not know that he is pledged to himself not to look but at one side, the permitted side, not as a man, but as a parish minister? He is a retained attorney, and these airs of the bench not know that he is pledged to himself not to look but at one side, the permitted side, not

The Emersonian and Randian echoes are almost too numerous to count. First, Lee’s lamentation at the state of conformity and his assertion of self-reliance as its aversion is a virtual transcription of ‘Self-Reliance’; second, critiquing the sense of ‘finding security in mass imitation’ echoes Emerson’s complaint about society as a joint-stock company in which individuals ‘surrender [their] liberty’ and Rand’s castigation of individuals for whom ‘the moral appraisal of [oneself] by others is [the] primary concern which supersedes truth, facts, reason, and logic’ [Rand 1964: 101]; third, Lee’s claim that ‘independent inquiry’ is ‘essential to genuine understanding’ aligns precisely with Emerson’s postulation that ‘nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind’ [Emerson 1841b: 148] and Rand’s conception of the source of ethical action as being located in ‘the independent mind that recognizes no authority higher than its own’ [Rand 1957: 1030]; fourth, and most remarkably, Lee’s dismay at the convolution of the ‘means’ resulting in the occlusion of the end dovetails with Rand’s extensive critique in the context of academic scholarship of what she described as the ‘unreadable’, which similarly confuses rather than enlightens and results in stultification rather than liberation [Rand 1973a: 117-118; see also Barrowman 2017: 155-156].

Continuing on this perfectionist path, Lee’s solution to the organized despair of classical martial arts study and practice took the form of encouraging martial artists not to seek ‘security’, not to seek out that which ‘satisfies’ their particular desires [Lee 1971b: 125], and to use their study and practice instead ‘as a mirror for self-examination’ [Lee 1971a: 27]. As I indicated in the Introduction, this is the fundamental philosophical gesture of jeet kune do. This gesture is not only ubiquitous across Lee’s writings, it even provides the thematic thrust for the climactic confrontation in the hall of mirrors in Enter the Dragon.

In this particular passage, Lee’s assertion that the moral appraisal of oneself by others is the primary concern which supersedes truth, facts, reason, and logic aligns precisely with Rand’s conception of the source of ethical action as being located in the independent mind that recognizes no authority higher than its own. Rand’s extensive critique in the context of academic scholarship of what she described as the ‘unreadable’ results in stultification rather than liberation. Lee’s solution to this organized despair of classical martial arts study and practice took the form of encouraging martial artists not to seek ‘security’, but to use their study and practice instead ‘as a mirror for self-examination’. As I indicated in the Introduction, this is the fundamental philosophical gesture of jeet kune do. This gesture is not only ubiquitous across Lee’s writings, it even provides the thematic thrust for the climactic confrontation in the hall of mirrors in Enter the Dragon.

In light of this observation, Lee, in language that is strikingly Emersonian and Randian, laments:

On this point, there is a still deeper connection between Lee and Rand. In earlier drafts of this essay, Lee’s designation for martial artists who refused, either in ignorance or denial, to use their study and practice as a means of confronting themselves and who used it instead as a means of finding security in conformity was, in a Randian register, secondhand artists. In one draft, he even devoted an entire section to the ‘secondhand artist’ [Lee 1971f: 171-173]. For her part, Rand often directed criticisms at those to whom she referred as ‘second-handers’ [Rand 1945/2007: 633-636, 712-717; 1973b; 1974b]. In fact, so important was understanding this entity to Rand that her initial working title for her novel The Fountainhead was Second-Hand Lives [Sciabarra 1995/2013: 100; Berliner 2007: 44].
In Lee’s estimation, one of the most challenging hurdles to jump on the path to liberation is a manifestation of skepticism that I have critiqued elsewhere under the heading of the paradigm subjectivity argument [see Barrowman 2018b: 176–177; 2019a: 20–21]. Doubtful of the conceptual validity of objectivity, this is a radically perspectival and thoroughly subjectivist argument. As it manifests in film studies, for example, the argument dictates that, rather than the objective content of a film determining the appropriateness or inappropriateness of a given interpretive paradigm, the interpretive paradigm allegedly ‘determines’ the film’s ‘objective content’. This is obviously anathema to Objectivism; it is also anathema to jeet kune do. To clarify his philosophical perspective on combat, Lee offers in ‘Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate’ the following thought experiment:

*Suppose several persons who are trained in different styles of combative arts witness an all-out street fight. I am sure we would hear different versions from each of these stylists. Such variations are quite understandable, for one cannot see a fight (or anything else) as is as long as he is blinded by his chosen point of view, i.e. style, and he will [instead] view the fight through the lens of his particular conditioning. Fighting, as is, is simple and total. It is not limited to your perspective or conditioning … [Contrariwise,] true observation begins when one sheds set patterns, and true freedom of expression occurs when one is beyond systems.*

[Lee 1971a: 25]

In addition to implicitly acknowledging vis-à-vis metaphysics what Rand termed the primacy of existence, as well as implicitly acknowledging vis-à-vis epistemology the axiomatic status of the concepts of existence, identity, and consciousness, Lee is unmistakably critiquing the paradigm subjectivity argument. Sensing this – and, by extension, sensing its hostility to poststructuralist philosophy, which has elevated the paradigm subjectivity argument to dogma – Bowman takes Lee to task for what he considers the arrogant presumptuousness of Lee’s critique:

*[Jeet kune do is] what [Lee] regarded as a ‘scientific’ or pragmatic search for efficiency in martial arts … Of course, this ‘science’ took the form of a rationalized or rationalistic approach (one that desired to be fully Rational) … [which] sounds very slick … [but embedded in which are] any number of aporias and problems … First is the assumption that this rationale is rational. For (second), is it really possible to know, or to decide, with certainty, what might be ‘useful’ and what might be ‘useless’ in advance of having studied a particular style for the requisite period of time in order to have mastered it? Can one know in advance? How does one decide? Thirdly, although this is all part and parcel of an engaging humanist and individualist critique of institutionalization, the problem with Bruce Lee’s pragmatic, ostensibly anti-theoretical, anti-institutional stance is that … like so many anti-institutional projects Lee evidently misrecognizes the fact that his understanding of what he calls the ‘actual reality of combat’ is precisely that – an understanding, and moreover, one which ‘stands under’ his overwhelming identification with the principles of one particular theoretical paradigm – namely, the strategies and principles of wing chun kung fu.*

[Bowman 2010a: 186–187]

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28 For a stirring account of an individual’s experience with Lee’s philosophical writings, and specifically with ‘Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate’ and this perfectionist dimension of self-examination, in conjunction with *Enter the Dragon,* see Davis Miller’s [2000: 45–47] account of how Lee clued him in to the fact that ‘I was an individual. Or at least I could become one!’ [Miller 2000: 45].

29 This particular formulation was put down on paper by Lee around 1971; however, this had long been Lee’s attitude towards his martial arts study and practice. One of his friends and sparring partners during the 1960s, Leo Fong, once reported a conversation with Lee in which Lee conveyed to him this important insight in a slightly different form: ‘As I look back, I realize that what Bruce imparted [to] me was not totally about physical combat; it was about life … I got a glimpse of that when he said, “I practice martial arts so I can knock the hell out of my fears and insecurities” … What Bruce showed me and taught me was the need to develop inner strength and self-reliance’ [Fong in Bishop 2004: 12, my emphasis].

30 For terminological clarification, my invocations of skepticism henceforth are in reference not to what has been characterized in philosophical circles as ‘ordinary incredulity’, which does not exceed the realm of the rational, but to what has been characterized as ‘radical doubt’, which does exceed the realm of the rational [Klein 2015; see also Wittgenstein 1951/1969; Austin 1961; 1962a; 1962b; and Cavell 1979; 1988].
Readily discernible in this passage is, in Emersonian terms, the scoffing of a skeptic. Discernible are several contradictions which demonstrate the irreducible irrationality of skepticism. First, over the course of his distinctly Derridean deconstruction of Lee's belief in (the human capacity to know) the essence of combat, Bowman appears to momentarily drop his poststructuralist context in order to ask if it is possible to determine the usefulness or uselessness of a given style or method of combat in advance of having studied it 'for the requisite period of time in order to have mastered it'. This question interestingly takes it for granted that there is a (presumably well-known and well-established) requisite period of study time, that it is objectively possible to master a style, and that it is possible to know that a style has been mastered (presumably on the basis of a correctly understood essence of combat). I will leave it to Bowman to untangle these knots with respect to the claims of poststructuralism vis-à-vis objectivity, knowledge, decision-making, and the like.

Further, Bowman is implicitly claiming here that insofar as an understanding of combat (or anything else, for that matter) is attributable to an individual human being – in this case, to Lee – it is, for that, by definition disqualified as knowledge. The Kantian implication here is that, because human beings must use their faculty of consciousness to perceive and conceptualize the facts of reality, anything that is produced by the use of that faculty is by definition antithetical to whatever the concept of 'knowledge' is that is being used to disqualify Lee's claim to it. I suspect that what Bowman would find most troubling is the corollary fact that, even if one were to concede to him the terms of this Kantian position, then, logically speaking, those terms would apply equally to him, which would force him to concede that the point that he is trying to make – that Lee's understanding of combat cannot be a/the truth because it is Lee's understanding – cannot, itself, be a/the truth, for Bowman's understanding (of combat and of Lee's understanding of combat) is only his understanding. And how can he, and on what grounds, possibly claim to 'know' anything?

Perhaps due to a Gramscian obsession with 'hegemony' and a Foucauldian focus on 'power' [see Bowman 2007; 2008b;], Bowman, given his poststructuralist conditioning, cannot but (mis)understand Lee's critique of the paradigm subjectivity argument as an attempt on Lee's part merely to hegemonically (i.e. disingenuously and hypocritically) institute his own paradigm under the guise of an allegedly-but-impossibly 'rational' discourse of 'truth'. Though it is interesting to ponder whether, having dubiously reduced all human activity to the aforementioned Hobbesian nightmare in which nothing exists but a quasi-Nietzschean Will to Power, Bowman believes his position as he 'intervenes' into Lee's philosophy to be the more honest and noble for knowingly seeking to 'dominate' and 'hegemonize' or whether he is unaware of the hypocrisy, what is clear is that Bowman's ultimate aim is to reject (in theory if not in practice) what Cavell has characterized as 'the arrogance of philosophy, its claim to speak universally' [Cavell 2004: 3; see also Cavell 1994]. The perfectionist rejinder to this rejection of 'arrogance' is to clarify that such skeptical positions betray a fear of the responsibility of forthrightly facing and thinking through objective reality, or what Lee referred to as 'the reality of the ever-changing, “what is”' [Lee 1971a: 25].

Bruce Lee and the Perfection of Martial Arts (Studies)
Kyle Barrowman

32 I have in mind here the following passage from Emerson's essay on the 'Over-Soul': 'The mind is one, and the best minds, who love truth for its own sake, think much less of property in truth – they accept it thankfully everywhere and do not label or stamp it with any man's name, for it is theirs long beforehand and from eternity ... [And] we know truth when we see it, let skeptic and scoffer say what they choose. Foolish people ask you, when you have spoken what they do not wish to hear, 'How do you know it is truth, and not an error of your own?' We know truth when we see it ... as we know when we are awake that we are awake' [Emerson 1841d: 267-268].

33 In the vein of Wittgenstein's observation that 'the game of doubting itself presupposes certainty' [Wittgenstein 1951/1969: 18e] inasmuch as 'the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn' [Wittgenstein 1951/1969: 44e], Todd McGowan has shrewdly pointed out that 'the problem with the project of radical doubt is that it can never be radical enough. No matter how diligently I work to put everything into question, there remains a point from which I put everything into question, and this point acts as a self-refuting anchor of certainty' [McGowan 2012: 197 n.14].

34 For his part, Bowman has postulated that any and every 'desire to educate' is actually (but, given his Kantian brand of skepticism, how could he [claim to] know this, or anything else, without refuting his own philosophical position?) a desire to dominate, alter, lead, or indeed to hegemonize [Bowman 2008b: 45; cf. Barrowman 2018b: 199-203]. Leaving aside the incoherent Kantianism, the radical doubt vis-à-vis other minds [cf. Austin 1946 and Cavell 1979], and the pernicious conflation of 'education' and 'domination', if this picture of education-as-domination is valid, then Bowman's own desires must be equally reprehensible – unless he is somehow exempt from this picture, in which case, redolent of Louis Althusser's incoherent critique of ideology [Althusser (1970) 1971; cf. Carroll 1988: 53-88], Bowman's 'desire to educate' not being reducible to a 'desire to dominate, to alter, lead, or indeed to hegemonize' [Bowman 2008b: 45; cf. Barrowman 2018b: 199-203]. Leaving aside the incoherent Kantianism, the radical doubt vis-à-vis other minds [cf. Austin 1946 and Cavell 1979], and the pernicious conflation of 'education' and 'domination', if this picture of education-as-domination is valid, then Bowman's own desires must be equally reprehensible – unless he is somehow exempt from this picture, in which case, redolent of Louis Althusser's incoherent critique of ideology [Althusser (1970) 1971; cf. Carroll 1988: 53-88], Bowman's 'desire to educate' not being reducible to a 'desire to dominate, alter, lead, or indeed to hegemonize' [Bowman 2008b: 45; cf. Barrowman 2018b: 199-203].

35 As Cavell has framed the skeptic's dilemma: 'The alternative to speaking for myself representatively (for someone else's consent) is not speaking for myself privately. The alternative is having nothing to say, being voiceless, not even mute' [Cavell 1979: 28]. Or, as Rand framed it: 'Skepticism is an act of annihilation, a wish to negate existence, an attempt to wipe out reality. But existence exists; reality is not to be wiped out, it will merely wipe out the wiper. By refusing to say, “It is”, you are refusing to say, “I am”. By suspending your judgment, you are negating your person. When a man declares, “Who am I to know?”, he is declaring, “Who am I to live?”' [Rand 1957: 1018]. For more elaborate discussions of the fear at the heart of skepticism, see Rand [1957: 1009-1069], Cavell [1979: 236-240], and, for my own take, Barrowman [2018b; 2018c; 2018d].
In a previously quoted passage from Emerson’s essay on the ‘Over-Soul’, Emerson sagaciously observes that skepticism often follows from fear. After all, Emerson did not merely say that ‘foolish people ask you, “How do you know it is truth, and not an error of your own”’, as if to say that skepticism is always and only an epistemological problem of knowledge; instead, and more pointedly, he said that ‘foolish people ask you, when you have spoken what they do not wish to hear, “How do you know it is truth, and not an error of your own?”’, which is to say that skepticism is often not just an epistemological problem of knowledge but also an ethical problem of acknowledgment [see Cavell (1969) 2002; 1972/1981; 1979; 1988]. As Cavell relates:

Acknowledging is not an alternative to knowing … Incorporating, or inflecting, the concept of knowledge, the concept of acknowledgment is meant, in my use, to declare that what there is to be known philosophically remains unknown not through ignorance … But through a refusal of knowledge, a denial or a repression of knowledge, say even a killing of it. [Cavell 1988: 51]

To add a perverse twist to this issue, that which skeptics and scoffers do not wish to hear, that which they refuse to acknowledge, that which they wish to kill, is the truth, for it is the concept of truth – and, with it, as corollary concepts, the concepts of objectivity and knowledge – that threatens to invalidate as irrational and immoral the skeptical indulgence in relativism and indeterminacy. Hence Emerson’s conception of ‘genius’ as the cultivation of self-reliance, i.e. of the moral courage that allows one to acknowledge the (conceptual validity of) truth:

To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men – that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost, and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment … [The genius of self-reliance is thus the ability] to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else tomorrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another. [Emerson 1841c: 145-146]

From this perfectionist perspective, rather than seeking to dominate or hegemonize, Lee seeks merely to ‘speak his latent conviction’, and to reject this perfectionist gesture as ‘arrogant’ is to betray a timidity of which Lee himself was well-aware. As he once conveyed to an interviewer:

We have a Zen parable that tells of a man who said, ‘Master, I must seek liberation’. The teacher asked, ‘And who binds you?’ The student answered, ‘I do not know. Perhaps I bind myself’ … Each man binds himself; the fetters are ignorance, laziness, preoccupations with the self [i.e. foolish consistency], and fear. [Lee 1966: 46]

Approaching Lee’s argument from beyond Bowman’s timid and tempered poststructuralist prerogative, it becomes clear that, in
'Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate' and, indeed, with jeet kune do more broadly, what Lee sought to achieve was to encourage martial artists to concern themselves not with trying to determine what will (always, a priori) work in every combative context and to concern themselves instead with cultivating self-reliance in order to have the courage to enter into any combat situation confident in their ability to determine what will work here and now in this context based on this martial artist and this opponent. On this point, Dan Inosanto usefully elaborated:

It was Bruce's habit to forever expound the advantages and disadvantages of the various combat styles – none were overlooked. He counseled his disciples not to think in terms of East versus West, Chinese versus Japanese, Okinawan versus Korean, karate versus judo, etc., for the purpose of determining which was better; but, rather, to examine each method individually, find its pluses and minuses, then inquire of ourselves, 'When will this work for me?' In other words, if I have two weapons, a hand grenade and a knife, and someone asks which is superior, I'd reply, 'It depends.'

[Inosanto 1976: 100]38

Of course, by emphasizing the importance of context, Lee was all but inviting a counter in the form of a Derridean deconstruction of the concept of context.39 Not one to miss a poststructuralist trick, Bowman tried to counter with exactly that:

There are many other different paradigms [beyond wing chun] which interpret the actual reality of combat and the notion of being simple and direct very differently. For example, tai chi ch'üan and aikido see 'simple and direct' as requiring circularity (and not straight lines [as in wing chun]) and the truth and reality of combat as lying in the other's motion (not one's own).

Then there are myriad styles of jujutsu, chin-na, and grappling that privilege forceful leverage; there are pugilistic styles each with different approaches to delivering strikes, from whirlwinds to thrusts, spins, and twists using momentum, to those of boxing's Queensbury Rules; and from jumping/leaping styles to Dim Mak pressure point fighting. Different principles obtain if you are trying to kill, restrain, or escape; just as they do if there is one-versus-one, one-versus-several, several-versus-one, or many-versus-many; whether you or they are armed or unarmed; in a crowded pub or in a muddy field, and so on. The list of theories of what sort of directness or simplicity constitutes 'actual reality' and how this or that interpretation should be institutionalized is potentially endless.

[Bowman 2010b: 43]

The radical doubt here vis-à-vis the 'potentially endless' proliferation of combative contexts and the allegation that such proliferation renders impossible (indeed, nonsensical) the acquirement of knowledge of the 'simple and direct' is the product of a logical fallacy that J.L. Austin called 'the fallacy of asking about nothing-in-particular' [Austin 1940: 1961: 26]:

Suppose that in ordinary life I asked: 'What is the meaning of the word racy?' There are two sorts of thing I may do in response: I may reply in words, trying to describe what raciness is and what it is not, to give examples of sentences in which one might use the word racy, and of others in which one should not. Let us call this sort of thing 'explaining the syntaxes' of the word 'racy' in the English language. On the other hand, I might do what we may call 'demonstrating the semantics' of the word, by getting the questioner to imagine, or even actually to experience, situations which we should describe correctly by means of sentences containing the words 'racy', 'raciness', etc., and again other situations where we should not use these words ... And in the same way, if I wished to find out whether he understands the meaning of the word racy, I should test him at some length in these two ways ... Having asked in this way, and answered, ['What is the meaning of the word racy?'] ... we then try, being philosophers, to ask the further general question, 'What is the meaning of a word?' But there is something spurious about this question. We do not intend to mean by it a certain question which would be perfectly all right, namely, 'What is the meaning of (the word) 'word'? That would be no more general than is asking the meaning of the word 'rar', and would be answered in a precisely similar way. No, we want to ask, rather, 'What is the meaning of a -word-in-general' or 'of any word, not meaning 'any word you like to choose, but rather
In the context (no pun intended) of the present dispute between Lee and Bowman vis-à-vis self-reliance and skepticism, Lee's position is resoundingly Austinian. To return to Lee's own thought experiment with the street fight witnessed by a number of practitioners of different martial arts styles, rather than wanting Lee to explain what would have worked best in that context – what, say, the loser of that particular fight could have done differently or more effectively – Bowman is demanding that Lee answer the spurious question, 'What would work best in no-fight-in-particular?' To expect an answer to this pseudo-question, however, betrays a misunderstanding not just of Lee's argument in 'Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate' but of his entire philosophy insofar as it is a perfectionist philosophy.40 For Lee's concern in formulating jeet kune do was the establishment of the epistemological and ethical conditions of possibility for the blossoming of martial artists capable of acknowledging that, in contrast to the logic of the paradigm subjectivity argument, the 'ever-changing 'what is' of reality is that which provides the 'precarious' ground (apropos Lacan avec Freud) on which to determine in a given combative context what will work best, and his goal was not to provide 'security' or 'comfort' but to inspire martial artists to cultivate self-reliance in order to brave reality.

40 On a related note, Cavell once remarked, with specific reference to Derrida's ubiquitous gestures toward an endlessness of deferral; that such gesturing always brought to his mind 'a complaint Austin made more than once: vis-à-vis the allegedly 'infinite uses of language; the allegedly 'countless' kinds of use' of language, and the allegation that the 'context' of a use is infinitely complex, viz. that, to Austin, such gesturing amounted to nothing more than a transparent attempt 'to defer getting down to the business of counting them' [Cavell 1989: 74].

41 Well-aware that such misunderstandings were likely, Lee confessed in one of his earlier drafts of this essay: 'My reason tells me it is a vain hope, but I hope those who are steeped in solidified beliefs ... will read the following paragraphs with open-mindedness, leaving all the burdens of preconceived opinions and conclusions behind' [Lee 1971c: 128]. From a similar vantage point, Tori Moi [2009] deemed the hope of communicating across the divide of ordinary language philosophy and poststructuralism equally vain. Whether or not Lee and I are equally vain in our philosophical orientations is a judgment that must be made by each individual on his own, in answer to his own mind and his own conscience. For Emerson's part, he postulated that 'every man's words who speaks [in a perfectionist register] must sound vain to those who do not dwell in the same thought on their own part' [Emerson 1841a: 263].

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I began from a rather 'macro' perspective on academic inquiry before moving on to conduct a decidedly 'micro' analysis of the philosophical underpinnings of Lee's epochal essay 'Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate' and his conception of jeet kune do. Though pitched as a debate between two scholars obviously invested in Bruce Lee, one of my overriding concerns in writing this essay was to ensure that it would be of interest/value to more people than just the two principals involved in the discussion. Bowman and I are obviously invested in Bruce Lee, but is anything that I have had to say in the preceding of interest/value to someone doing fieldwork on capoeira, or analyzing the psychology of martial artists who compete in combat sports, or investigating the history of catch wrestling, etc.? To answer this question in any kind of detail would require making this already inordinately long essay even longer, so, in conclusion, I want merely to sketch some possible opportunities for future scholarship in light of what I have had to say here in this essay.

In recent years, we have heard talk of how the field of martial arts studies is 'pre-paradigmatic' [Bowman 2017, 2019; Judkins 2017]. This is an idea taken from Thomas Kuhn and his famous investigation of the structure of scientific revolutions' [Kuhn 1962/1996]. The idea is that, given the relative newness of martial arts studies, the same 'data' – whether a specific martial arts style, like aikido, or a specific sociopolitical event, like the Boxer Rebellion, or a specific historical figure, like Bruce Lee – is being analyzed through myriad lenses using myriad analytical tools. It seems to me that, by and large, as far as most martial arts studies scholars are concerned – the more the merrier. From a certain scholarly perspective, the pre-paradigm stage is the freest, most exciting, and most productive period precisely because there is so much, and so much diverse, activity. I completely understand this. I even experienced the same rush myself while attending the first few martial arts studies conferences, reading the first few issues of the Martial Arts Studies journal, etc. However, I think that it is time for martial arts studies to begin to look ahead to what comes after the pre-paradigm stage, namely discussion and debate as to which paradigms are useful for which sort of inquiries and which are not. If pluralism is the catchword here, there remains the question of what sort of pluralism is most conducive to the continued evolution of our field.

In the course of initiating a paradigm shift in the discipline of film studies, Noël Carroll contrasted two conceptions of pluralism and made a case for one over the other:

Here it pays to distinguish between two versions of theoretical pluralism ... One kind of theoretical pluralism might be called

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peaceful coexistence pluralism. Coexistence pluralism is very laid back. Everyone has his own theory; if you want to conjoin theories, well, that’s a matter of personal taste. You can accept some cognitive hypotheses, but if you also like some aspects of psychoanalysis (at this point, it is usually said, ‘I find it useful’), you can have that too. On the other hand, there is also methodologically robust pluralism. On this view, it is good to have lots of theories around as well. But it is good to have these theories around so that they can be put in competition with each other. From the point of view of the robust methodological pluralist, it is good to have a number of theories in the field at the beginning of the day, but by the end of the day, one hopes that some will be eliminated through processes of criticism and comparison in light of certain questions and the relevant evidence. Some ostensibly competing theories may, upon examination and debate, turn out to be complementary or supplementary. But many are also likely to fall by the wayside.

[Carroll 1996: 62-63]

Where does martial arts studies stand here? To this point, we have for the most part been content to bear with how much longer can – should – that last? Surely not every chapter from every book published in the Martial Arts Studies book series, or every essay downloaded from every issue of Martial Arts Studies, elicits from every martial arts studies scholar joy, assent, and the inspiration to follow suit. Surely there are countless discussions and debates that have not yet been initiated. When will that happen? Should that happen? If it should happen, how should it happen? For an example beyond the confines of Bruce Lee, in the previous issue of this journal, in the course of reviewing The Martial Arts Studies Reader, Qays Stetkevych decried the fondness in academia generally and martial arts studies specifically for ‘elitist post-structuralist terminolog[y]’ [Stetkevych 2019: 79] and denigrated ‘opaque … postmodern-esque word play’ [Stetkevych 2019: 81]. Are Stetkevych and I merely crying wolf (or, worse, tilting at windmills) or are there in fact pressing issues that we need to address as a field with respect to valid and invalid scholarship? If the latter, what mode of address is called for in broaching these issues?

At this year’s annual martial arts studies conference, Janet O’Shea argued for the probative value of what she called ‘oppositional civility’ [O’Shea 2019a; see also O’Shea 2019b] while Alexander Antonopoulos examined via the Dog Brothers the philosophy of ‘Higher Consciousness through Harder Contact’ [Antonopoulos 2019] and Brigid Burke discussed the need in training to manage one’s combative ‘intensity’ and to ‘calibrate’ oneself to one’s sparring partners [Burke 2019]. Returning to the present example of my exercise in alterdisciplinarity, on Antonopoulos’ terms, I think that I have hewed very closely (and I hope effectively) to the Dog Brothers’ mantra of higher consciousness through harder contact while, on Burke’s terms, I think that I have managed my intensity very well and calibrated myself appropriately to my sparring partner. However, on O’Shea’s terms, I can imagine someone (perhaps even my sparring partner himself) objecting that I have not been civil in my opposition, or, on Burke’s terms, that I have failed to manage my intensity and have inappropriately calibrated myself. These are familiar problems on the ‘martial arts’ side of the equation, but how are we to address these problems on the ‘martial arts studies’ side? How are we to adjudicate such debates over what constitutes a ‘proper’ debate, or over how to get the most out of a debate (for both those directly and indirectly involved in the debate)?

These are all open questions that are not addressed to any one person. Rather, they are addressed to everyone to whom martial arts studies matters. Returning to Kuhn, he believed that, upon initiating such debates as I have been encouraging here, there are three possible outcomes:

Sometimes normal science ultimately proves able to handle the [debate] despite the despair of those who have seen it as the end of an existing paradigm. On other occasions the [topic of debate] resists even apparently radical new approaches … Or, finally, the case that will most concern us here, a [debate] may end with the emergence of a new candidate for paradigm and with the ensuing battle over its acceptance.

[Kuhn 1962/1996: 84]

In this essay, I have offered new candidates to replace an existing paradigm. Will there be ensuing debate? Will other, similar, debates emerge in other areas, with other topics of debate? As Stephen Prince once averred, the ‘spirited opposition’ of ‘paradigm conflicts’ not only comes with the potential to illuminate [a] field’s basic and often unexamined assumptions and methods, its very history and traditions’, it also provides a ‘measure of the vitality of an academic field’ [Prince 1992: 49]. I, for one, think that it is time that we started to showcase the vitality of martial arts studies.
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FIGHTING OVER BRUCE LEE
PAUL BOWMAN

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ABSTRACT
This article responds to Kyle Barrowman’s polemic in this issue against my work on Bruce Lee. Part One of my response sets out the overarching problems with Barrowman’s misreading of my work and of poststructuralism. Part Two sets out some of the arguments I have actually made about Bruce Lee, as opposed to those Barrowman imputes to me. Readers principally interested in my own take on Bruce Lee could skip Part One. However, in both sections, the difference between Barrowman’s caricatured representations and my actual arguments about Bruce Lee should become clear. In the end, the article assesses Barrowman’s call for a rejection both of poststructuralism and of the tendency to read Lee as a proponent of East Asian philosophy.

KEYWORDS
Bruce Lee, Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Derrida, Cultural Studies, Philosophy

CITATION
PART ONE
STRAW BARROWMAN

Preliminary Note: Kyle Barrowman is an exceptionally vibrant, likeable and intelligent person, a former student with whom I have a longstanding friendly, collegial and respectful relationship. However, based on the tone and content of his article (‘Bruce Lee and the Perfection of Martial Arts (Studies): An Exercise in Alterdisciplinarity’), to which the following is a response, readers may not guess any of that. Anyone interested in the specifics of our disagreement should read on through this section (Part One). Readers who are more specifically interested in what I have to say about studying Bruce Lee may prefer to skip straight to Part Two.

INTRODUCTION
MEMES VERSUS QUOTES

Recently, while looking for visual aids to use in an undergraduate lecture on deconstruction as a tool for cultural analysis, I made a slight error in my search terms. I wanted to find some visually striking quotations from Jacques Derrida, so I decided to see whether any useful memes of Derrida quotations were available online. I duly typed ‘Jacques Derrida memes’ into my browser and searched for images. Unfortunately, what appeared were pictures of Derrida combined with supposedly hilarious or incisive jokes, such as: ‘Deconstruction is when you spell stuff wrong and the wronger it is the deconstructioner it is’, and ‘[Derrida] Thinks language is unable to clearly communicate ideas – writes books to prove it’. There were also pictures of Derrida with captions such as ‘I don’t always speak in paradoxes, but when I do, I don’t’, and pictures of celebrities apparently making non-comprehending or amusing statements about deconstruction. Mixed in with these results were memes about other philosophers too – my favourite being a picture of Ayn Rand with the caption: ‘Believes everyone across all disciplines, cultures and contexts can agree upon; simply and unequivocally objectively knows objective reality that everyone else should, too’.

I quickly realised I had used the wrong search terms: what I actually wanted were quotations, not just any old ‘Derrida memes’. In other words, I had literally asked the wrong question and hence found the wrong thing. So, I searched for Jacques Derrida quotations. This provided me with pictures of Derrida alongside actual quotations from his written work.

I begin with this anecdote because, when it happened, it occurred to me that reading Kyle Barrowman’s account of poststructuralism – and of my own work on Bruce Lee in relation to it – indeed, of my own work taken as an example of poststructuralism – was rather like reading the unfiltered ‘Jacques Derrida memes’. More precisely, it was like reading the work of someone who had only encountered such memes, taken them at face value, believed them to be an accurate representation of Derrida’s actual arguments (or philosophical, political or ethical positions), and felt the need to challenge and clear away such a silly thing.

Needless to say, the ludicrous caricature of Derridean deconstruction and/or poststructuralism that would arise from reading ‘Jacques Derrida memes’ would indeed be something deserving of refutation. But the problem with it would be that it would not be the refutation of Derridean deconstruction. It would be the refutation of a caricature – what in times gone by would be called a ‘straw man’ – a metaphor that is today routinely actualised in the form of memes.

In other words (spoiler alert), the best way to make sense of Barrowman’s critique is to be aware that he is, first and foremost, working with and against, and seeking to refute, a caricature of poststructuralism. The baseline problem here is that not only does he not seem to realise that it is a caricature, he also does not seem to realise that it is a caricature that he himself has drawn. He may well have read Derrida’s work and my own, but he has obviously seriously misunderstood it all, and then made matters worse by extrapolating a horribly off the mark argument from that misunderstanding.

Put simply: everything about it is wrong: from the opening claim that Luke White introduced the ‘scriptural reading problem’ (White is actually evoking my own treatment of that idea in the paper I gave at the Bruce Lee conference); to his own deployment of Derrida’s disagreement with Foucault as a prelude to the claim that poststructuralists cannot disagree with each other; to his inexplicable belief that I regard Bruce Lee as a poststructuralist; to the claim that ‘alterdisciplinarity’ involves a ‘claim to community’; to his twisting of my empirically verifiable observation that there is no immutable metaguide into a caricature in which I supposedly claim that there is no metaguide at all, ever; to his eccentric claim that ‘two of the fundamental presuppositions of poststructuralism are that the concept of objectivity is an illusion and that the corollary concept of truth is ... “metaphysical”’ (it is quite simply an abuse of reading to misrepresent poststructuralist or postfoundational ontology like this); to his association of poststructuralism with the argument that ‘power regimes’ are ‘repressive’ (Foucault organised an entire book – his most famous work – around an explicit refutation of the ‘repressive hypothesis’ argument); to his claim that I cannot ‘refute a claim made by Derrida’ (I can and will); to the idea that I ever suggested that people cannot talk to each other across disciplinary boundaries; to his claim that there is one simply and unequivocally objectively knowable objective reality that everyone across all disciplines, cultures and contexts can agree upon; to the idea that my (quoted) arguments about the contingent, complex
and contextual character of the notion of ‘effective’ or ‘best’ in combat somehow disagrees with certain (quoted) statements of Dan Inosanto, in which we literally argue much the same thing as each other; and way beyond: everything about it is wrong. How and why does this happen?

STRAW METHODS

The becoming-meme-like of ‘Jacques Derrida’, ‘poststructuralism’ and ‘Paul Bowman’ in Barrowman’s polemic takes place by Barrowman tendentiously curating a heterogeneous array of quotations, simplifying their possible meanings, and then working them over with hyperbolic adjectives and adverbs. Bits and pieces from here and there are thrown together with no respect for any protocols of thoroughgoing or sustained reading. This particularly postmodern form of abuse of context is bolstered by quotations from an array of authors who are explicitly opposed to an imagined mass delusion or undifferentiated entity called ‘poststructuralism’. These fragmented caricatures are then deployed as if they coalesce to constitute some kind of evidence, specifically in order to make generalisations about what ‘all’ poststructuralists do and do not, can and cannot ‘logically’ argue.

Against this backdrop, ‘Bowman’ is taken as a representative of some imagined unity called ‘poststructuralism’ and/or ‘all poststructuralists’, and the formula is applied. Hence, we keep hearing that ‘Bowman cannot say A about B, because X says Y about Z’. As if this form of argument were not problematic enough, Barrowman does all of this in a declared attempt to solve some unspecified and yet supposedly terrible problem. We don’t know what that problem is, but it is something to do with a herd of sheep called poststructuralism. To make matters even more murky, not only does Barrowman not spell out what the problem is, nor does he clarify the stakes and consequences. Rather, he stages an attempt to wrench together Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ayn Rand and Bruce Lee as ‘Western philosophers’ (in earlier iterations of this paper, the privileged term was ‘American philosophers’) – as if this offers any kind of a solution to anything.

This alleged trio are not then deployed to somehow beat poststructuralism by way of a direct confrontation or engagement with it, nor with anything poststructuralism sought to engage, nor indeed anything about poststructuralism at all. Rather, they are yoked together to argue that this trio themselves are all part of a very particular tradition of ‘Western philosophy’, an individualist and objectivist one; one that is presented as somehow universalist, individualist, true and objectively right, and at the same time somehow not local, contingent, contextual or indeed nationalist.

In the end we are presented with what we are told is a ‘paradigm’ comprised of a collection of mutually incompatible tenets, such as the idea that to be ethical we must all be independent minds and recognize no authority higher than our own perception of objectivity. This is allegedly because there is only one possibly true objectivity and one true unchanging metalanguage about it. All else is ‘subjective relativism’, or part of the ‘paradigm subjectivity argument’ (which – although it is apparently the cornerstone of Barrowman’s argument – is at no point defined, specified or discussed in the article. Readers are simply referred to other articles to find out what the term ‘paradigm subjectivity argument’ might possibly mean).

No consideration is given to such elementary and pedestrian matters as what might happen when one independent mind objectively perceives things differently from another independent mind, or of how such claims might measure up to the objectively perceptible cacophony of claims and counterclaims, proofs and counter-proofs, beliefs and counter-beliefs that – in and of itself – constitutes objective and all other simultaneously existing forms of reality. Instead, via an elementary confusion of signifier and referent, compounded by a radical disavowal of context, Barrowman simply asserts rhetorically that ‘scholars must be able to acknowledge that there is an objectively perceive reality that serves as our common frame of reference’. Unfortunately, even if things were so simple, the question remains one of whose or which mode of apprehension, measuring, quantifying, demarcating, distinguishing, and discussing reality we are supposed to obviously, objectively, necessarily, ineluctably, and without disagreement, remainder or problem choose. Indeed, by the end of his article, Barrowman explicitly advocates quelling and quashing all other perspectives and voices than his own.1

STRAW TRUMPING

This is just scraping the surface, the tip of the iceberg of the world of things that are wrong in Barrowman’s article. I could go further in

1 He does so while at the same time trying to argue that scholars such as Qays Stetkeyvych, Janet O’Shea and Alexander Antonopoulos are somehow in agreement with him, even though there is considerably more evidence that, ethically, politically, theoretically and practically, each of these scholars is explicitly aligned against any such ‘all or nothing’ positions as the one Barrowman is naively arguing for. In any case, in the works referred to by Barrowman: O’Shea was explicitly advocating the ‘antagonistic pluralism’ argument of Chantal Mouffe, which is a work of poststructuralist political theory; Antonopoulos’s work was based on an exploration of the work of the (yes, indeed) poststructuralist Michel Foucault; while the historian and linguist Qays Stetkeyvych opposes himself to any ‘jargon’ that gets in between the reader and the writing, including, without a doubt, the terms and preoccupations of any and all capital-P ‘Philosophy’ or other ‘Positions’.
This manner, but I want to avoid a simple point-by-point refutation here. Instead, I want at least to try to make this relevant and pertinent for a wider readership. And I propose to do so by identifying some of the most potentially serious dynamics and implications of this situation. These boil down to its intellectual and institutional politics and ethics (rather than the interpersonal psychodynamics or psychoanalytics of the argument between Barrowman and Bowman).

Let me put it like this. In an ideal world, I would like to just stop here, walk away from and ignore what is essentially an over-egged and half-baked intellectual mess. However, I fear that Barrowman’s parody of an argument against a caricature of poststructuralism – one organised by a systematic misreading and misrepresentation of my own work on Bruce Lee – is not simply something that should be ignored. This is because, although it may appear on first glance as merely the eccentric and regrettable outburst of an over-zealous and hasty young scholar, I fear it may also represent the first tentative foray of a certain kind of ideological project into the world of martial arts studies. Consequently, I feel it may be important to say something about what that impulse may be and what is troubling about it, before finally turning to answering and hopefully correcting Barrowman’s sustained misreading of my own work on Bruce Lee.

So, to be clear, again: Barrowman’s account both of my work and of poststructuralism is wrong. It is wrong in every single respect. It is wrong in terms of what Barrowman says about deconstruction and what he says about my own work, and this wrongness takes the form of twisting what I and other authors have literally and explicitly said and replacing it with meme-like caricatures. ‘Poststructuralism’ is set up to be ridiculed and destroyed. What is worst in all of this is that it occurs on the basis of a sustained and systematic abuse of elementary processes of reading. To be clear once more: I do not mean ‘reading’ in any extended or complex theoretical sense (such as you might find championed in the work of a Paul de Man or a J. Hillis Miller). Rather I mean reading as basic competence in information gathering – the kind of ‘comprehension skills’ that are taught from primary school age onwards.

In the face of this, the question that engages me most is why: Why does a particular kind of sustained and consistently incorrect twisting, misreading and misrepresentation of some of the most simple and direct statements I have made about Bruce Lee take place throughout Barrowman’s article? To begin to broach the question of why such a kind of ‘coherently incoherent’ misreading of me and/as poststructuralism is taking place, the first place to look for evidence is within Barrowman’s text itself.

One thing that characterises this text is the sheer volume and vehemence of hyperbolical all-or-nothing formulations, adjectives and adverbs used to tarnish me and characterise me as a timid, woolly-brained, unthinking sheep. This is a consistent feature throughout the diatribe sections of Barrowman’s article. A range of ad hominem insults are presented as ‘engaging’ with not just me as an individual, but with me taken as a good example of an entire intellectual tradition. Here, Barrowman calls that tradition ‘poststructuralism’. Other polemicsists, such as Slavoj Žižek or Jordan Peterson (who are each supposedly ‘on the left’ and ‘on the right’ respectively, but who are in most respects two indistinguishable sides of the same coin) have termed the enemy ‘cultural studies’ or ‘postmodernist, deconstructionist cultural studies’, and similar terms.

To use his own words, Barrowman calls me his ‘whipping boy of choice’. Certainly, lashing out at (while not actually managing to whip) me is an integral part of his project, whose aim is to take down the entire tradition that I am said to represent, and to replace it with something else. That ‘something else’, as already noted, is a bizarre hybrid mishmash whose mode of address is polemic, and which is supposedly encapsulated or exemplified in the writings of Ayn Rand, an eccentric moralist who championed heroic individualism, was bitterly opposed to collectivities and was a celebrant of capitalism, regarding its ideology or ethos as the font of all ethics. Unsurprisingly, Rand is popular among contemporary proponents of right-wing thought. And no one else at all.

The question is: is Rand just any old philosopher – someone who may just happen to be a darling of the mainstream white conservative American right, but who Barrowman just happens to have chosen for entirely unrelated reasons, to single out and prioritise, individually, unilaterally, and independently, via free and rational choice, in ways that are totally unconnected to today’s resurgent reactionary right-wing ideology? Or is there something else going on?

Closer inspection of other authors and authorities that Barrowman cites to try to underpin, support and justify his positions reveals one other conspicuous name: Jordan Peterson. Peterson is today instantly recognisable as the contemporary poster-boy of the right-wing North

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2 Earlier versions were worse. The final published version has fewer hyperbolical adjectives and adverbs in it than earlier, more febrile drafts.

3 I have written about Žižek’s polemics against all of this at length. I have not yet been moved to engage with Jordan Peterson’s reactionary versions of the same – but that is essentially what they are, albeit ‘lighter and whiter’.
American backlash against any and all caring, communitarian, or left-leaning thinking. Peterson’s enemies, too, are exemplified by such demonic spectral bogeymen as ‘cultural studies’, ‘poststructuralism’, ‘feminism’ and ‘Jacques Derrida’. Peterson himself explicitly demonises fields such as women’s studies, ethnic studies, cultural studies, and approaches such as poststructuralism, along with thinkers such as Jacques Derrida (who is singled out for particular opprobrium in Peterson’s writings). This is because all of these examples allegedly engender outlooks that revel in victimhood. And here is Peterson, in the footnotes of Barrowman’s text. Perhaps he is just a mere extra in a crowd-scene. Or perhaps he is more like Cassius in *Julius Caesar*, the witches in *Macbeth*, or ‘Little Finger’ in *Game of Thrones*.

Of course, the obvious retort to my implied connection of Rand, Peterson, and contemporary reactionary right-wing conservativism is that while Rand may indeed be much beloved of the modern American right, Peterson on the other hand is merely an innocent individualist, who, like Barrowman, openly avows that he would follow no crowd. Yet, at the same time as this, Peterson’s ‘philosophy’ of individual rationality *just happens*, *every time*, *on every occasion*, *in the face of every issue*, to align itself with the position of the dominant socioeconomic class of wealthy white North American males.5

In other words, it seems there are grounds to propose that there may be an ideological agenda subtending and exceeding Barrowman’s publicly-stated aim of elevating not only Emerson but also Rand and, of course, Bruce Lee to the status of Great Western Philosopher. Whether Barrowman is conscious of this and whether his alignment is intentional or not is another question. But the available textual evidence suggests that reactionary conservative nationalist impulses may be at work in and through his project, if not his conscious intention. My own sense is that Barrowman may principally be drawn to self-help psychologists like Peterson (and indeed Emerson and Bruce Lee) because they seem to offer a corrective to some of the supposed excesses of politically correct scholarship, which emphasizes ‘others’, ‘community’, and other apparently terrible terms over such supposedly self-evidently obvious positives as ‘self-reliance’ and ‘independence’.

In what follows I will challenge this ideological orientation. And I will do so by clarifying, in terms that are as simple and direct as possible, what I have actually argued about Bruce Lee. This is very different from what Barrowman claims I have argued. In the end I will come back to some of the ways in which this approach must be regarded as academically, intellectually, morally and ethically superior to any based upon the assorted ideas of self-help pop psychologists, whether left- or right-leaning. It is superior simply because it is more rigorous, respectful of detail, actuality, fact, reality and indeed objectivity than the simplistic reductivism of that old misnomer, ‘objectivism’.

**PART TWO**

**COMPLICATED LEE**

**INTRODUCTION**

**ARTICULATING BRUCE LEE**

To begin again (‘same but different’): I have always believed Bruce Lee to be a hugely influential and transformative cultural figure. However, when I was doing my graduate work in the field of cultural studies, I noticed that many of my academic peers did not perceive him in the same way – writing him off as ‘merely’ a 1970s action film star. So, my initial interest in writing about him was in redressing this situation.

This is what drove me to write my two main books that focused on him, *Theorizing Bruce Lee: Film-Fantasy-Fighting-Philosophy* [2010] and *Beyond Bruce Lee: Chasing the Dragon through Film, Philosophy, and Popular Culture* [2013].

However, before all of that, the very first – tentative, exploratory – written academic engagement that I ever staged with Bruce Lee was a conference paper titled ‘Enter the Derridean: The Martial Architecture of Taoism as Contemporary Cultural Theory’. I presented this at a conference called ‘The Architecture of Philosophy and The Philosophy of Architecture’ in 2004. In my abstract I wrote:

> This paper deconstructs the architecture of the Žižekian-Marxist argument that such diverse formations as ‘New Age’ Western Buddhism, cultural studies, neoliberalism and postmodernism are equivalent reaction formations to ‘capitalism’. That is, bluntly stated: in a Žižekian-Marxian paradigm, the ‘success’ of deconstruction and anti-essentialist cultural theory and politics is equivalent or even identical...
to the ‘success’ of Bruce Lee, his deconstructed kung fu, and his own anti-essentialist theory, politics and strategy, as encapsulated (all too easily, as it were) in the film Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story. The paper analyses the architecture of paradigms that draw such differences into equivalence as Derrida and Bruce Lee, Taoism and neoliberalism, and – exemplarily – capitalism and cultural studies. It asks the ‘ontological question’ that Žižek claims both cultural studies and deconstruction absolutely forbid: What do these things really ‘have’ in common? And it asks the more ‘proper’, anti-essentialist question of what does the perspective which sees such equivalence itself project or set up in order to see it? Fundamentally, then, this work reconsiders the architecture of the arguably essential theoretical concept of ‘articulation’.

This was subsequently written up and published under the different title of 'Enter the Žižekian: Bruce Lee, Martial Arts, and the Problem of Knowledge' [Bowman 2006]. I was not entirely happy with this title, but the editor wanted it (because Žižek was popular at that time), so I agreed. But the title was misleading because what I was actually arguing against was Žižek. This is because Žižek fostered dismissive and disparaging views of the political and cultural value of anything that was not explicitly ‘radically anti-capitalist’. I was certainly neither a disciple of Žižek nor uncritically accepting of his perspectives or arguments. Rather, I wanted to subject them to critical inquiry.

Nonetheless, many people read books by their covers – indeed, by their titles. So, this title (along with that of a book I co-edited, called The Truth of Žižek [Bowman and Stamp 2007]) put out the idea that ‘Bowman is a Žižekian’. Ironically, anyone who reads ‘Enter the Žižekian’ will eventually arrive at its conclusion, the final words of which are:

... the mistake that Bruce Lee made was to believe that what he constructed actually succeeded in going ‘directly’ and ‘immediately to the heart of things’. That is, Lee too (like Žižek) falls into the trap of believing that his own constructions are ‘objective’, free from ‘institution’, free from belief, from theory, from myth and fiction – as if simply ‘true’. But there is no getting away from the contingency of institution, the contingency of culture. Everything is instituted. And institutions are consequential. As we have clearly seen, Bruce Lee was from the origin a postmodern, interdisciplinary, multicultural and – despite Žižekian dismissiveness of such things – consequential institution. The ‘event’ of Bruce Lee was clearly not simple. Perhaps not ‘deep’ or ‘enigmatic’ in any romantic sense, it was nevertheless multiple and complex, simultaneously mythic and real, both theoretical and practical, equally imaginary and institutional. So, vis-à-vis the martial arts and questions of cultural knowledge more widely, what is clear is that the approach must always be supplemented with the awareness that ‘An institution ... is not merely a few walls or some outer structures surrounding, protecting, guaranteeing or restricting the freedom of our work; it is also and already the structure of our interpretation' [Derrida 1992: 22-23]. So the question will always remain: what’s your style? [Bowman 2006: 36]

All of this was subsequently expanded and developed into the first chapter of my first book on Bruce Lee, Theorizing Bruce Lee [Bowman 2010]. Admittedly, the paragraph above was polished and refined; so, for instance, the sentence in which Lee himself was said to have been a ‘consequential institution’ was changed to the more nuanced claim that Bruce Lee was a ‘consequential founder of many forms of institution’ [Bowman 2010: 64]. But the argument was the same.

After publishing Theorizing Bruce Lee, I found that I still had more to say about Lee – or rather, more questions and problems that I wanted to explore by way of thinking with, through, for and against the life and times, films and words, and – of course – combat training innovations of Bruce Lee. So, more questions were posed, more papers were written, until ultimately Beyond Bruce Lee was born [Bowman 2013c]. However, it was never my desire to become an ‘expert’ on Bruce Lee, or to claim to offer the definitive last word on him or his legacies. Rather, it was all about how interesting a case study he was, as a prism for refracting issues in film-, media-, cultural-, political-, and ultimately martial arts-studies. Bruce Lee was my muse, my anchor and my acid test: my way of thinking and testing the relationships between (claims about) film and culture, fantasy and practice, institution and innovation, etc. He was (and remains) inexhaustibly fascinating to me.

The point is, my academic interest and orientation was always exploratory and experimental. I used what I had seen and read of his life and times, work, interventions and achievements, and what had been done with his name, image, ideas, texts and legacies, to test different academic theories, propositions, positions and arguments about culture, society and ideology (such as those of Žižek, with which we began). I did this to establish where I stood in relation to the topics, themes and issues that philosophers and cultural studies academics were exploring in their own ways via their own examples.

As my first ever abstract (quoted above) about Bruce Lee shows, I sought to take seriously Žižek’s proposition that the ‘architecture’ of contemporary cultural theory was part and parcel of the same
ideological movements that had produced what he termed ‘Western Buddhism’ and ‘Western Taoism’ [Žižek 2001; Bowman 2007a]. Among the reasons I took seriously Žižek’s claim that this was all a kind of intellectual mush was because among the things I really did take seriously were Daoism (in my life), poststructuralist-informed cultural theory (in my intellectual formation), cultural studies (as a ‘project’ that I believed in), martial arts (as serious and valuable practices) and Bruce Lee (as a massively important cultural event and text). I was also intrigued by a question once raised by Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick, who pondered whether she had been drawn to deconstruction because she accepted the anti-essentialist worldviews of Daoism and Buddhism or whether she had been drawn to Daoism and Buddhism because she accepted the anti-essentialist ontology of deconstruction [Sedgwick 2003]. My aim was to use sensitive and well-informed readings of and reflections on Lee as a way to explore the value of academic arguments and philosophical positions. So, I was relating ‘Philosophy’ or ‘Theory’ back to the reality (or evidence field) of culture, and testing scholars’ claims by analysing Lee, whom I was treating as a considerably more subtle and complex example than many of them would tend to do themselves, for any number of reasons. None of the thinkers that I entangled in my reflections were pigeonholed, simplified, stereotyped, disparaged, denounced or dismissed. None were polemically placed in an enemy camp. I used descriptive terms (such as ‘poststructuralist’, ‘Lacanian’, ‘Marxist’, and suchlike), but these designations were never analytically relevant: I never bundled diverse thinkers together and beat them with damning adjectives or adverbs. The work was never simply to pitch ‘poststructuralism’, say, against ‘Marxism’ [on which matter, see Peters 2001]. It was rather to discern the most salient arguments of specific thinkers and assess their validity by applying them in the analysis of ‘Bruce Lee’ in terms of specific questions relating to such matters as invention, institution, innovation, encounters, events, identities, values, and so on. I am spending the time to explain this in the hope that it illustrates the fact that my approach was clearly very different from anything Barrowman either appreciates or carries out himself, as he evidently prefers constructing and polemizing against straw men, not in order to learn anything about culture, politics, society, or indeed even just Bruce Lee, but rather in order to (appear to) score points against an imagined academic enemy.

### POSTSTRUCTURALIST LEE

I have set out these key coordinates of my early academic engagements with Bruce Lee to set the record straight and in the hope that the alert reader will see immediately the abusive mistreatment and misrepresentation of the situation that takes place in Barrowman’s diatribe. However, in case this is not yet shining through, and in order to ward off the hugely tempting but possibly petty point-by-point refutation of Barrowman’s claims, let me merely focus on one core misreading.

It is this: Barrowman regularly claims that I attempt to read Bruce Lee as a poststructuralist thinker. He writes, at the very beginning, ‘my challenge in this essay will be to argue for what I have conceived of as a perfectionist Bruce Lee over and against that which Bowman has conceived of as a poststructuralist Bruce Lee’. He maintains this charge against all evidence to the contrary. In my texts, I have identified ways in which Lee fails to measure up to the quality of thinking required to fall into such a category. I have painted him as a multiculturalist postmodern individualist, and also an anti-institutionalist self-help hippy – very much of his era – and there is such ample evidence for such characterisations that I unreservedly stand by them. However, none of the terms I have applied to Bruce Lee necessarily have anything to do with poststructuralism.

Bruce Lee was not a poststructuralist, nor – to be entirely clear – have I ever claimed that he was one. My exploration of Bruce Lee in relation to poststructuralism (or, as I would prefer, deconstruction) starts and ends with questions of institutions. Deconstruction involves the critical interrogation and critique of institutions – institutions of interpretation, principally: instituted ways of reading, ways of interpreting, ways of constructing arguments, and so on. Bruce Lee was intellectually interesting to me in this regard as he was not only a brilliant, ingenious and inspirational onscreen martial artist, but also an anti-institutional thinker. What initially interested me most in this regard were two points: first, the historical specificity of his radicalism (1960s California); and, second, the ways he tried to navigate the paradoxes and problems that arise when one wants to break away from institutionality, and at the same time go on to form another – different – kind of pedagogical relationship or (anti-)institution.

I was always interested by his desire to escape – and to encourage others to escape – from what he regarded as the stultifying effects of hierarchical, convention-bound pedagogical institutions, especially when coupled with his simultaneous desire to continue to operate in the world of teacher-student pedagogical relations [Lee 1971, 1975]. This seeming contradiction reminded me very much of Jacques Rancière’s...
thinking on pedagogy and politics [Rancière 1991], so I explored both Lee and Rancière in terms of each other [Bowman 2010, 2013c, 2016b].

Lee clearly wanted to break away from something to do with conventional martial arts teaching and learning (specifically, the militarized, hierarchical, robotic, production-line approach, historically rooted in the first half of the 20th century, and its end results). But not everything. He clearly enjoyed playing the oriental sage. This was noted by many of his contemporaries and subsequent biographers [Hyams 1979; Preston 2007; Inosanto 1994]. Barrowman himself even quotes Lee reciting a Zen parable – unprompted. Bruce Lee often orientalised himself.

Given such self-orientalising tendencies, along with the kinds of books we know that Lee possessed and his habit of passing off the words of his favourite authors as if they were his own, it is clear that Lee preferred to align himself with a vision of the teacher as sage, guru, wise man, inspiration and guide, rather than the drill-sergeant figure that was then-current in the world of martial arts pedagogical institutions (particularly within Japanese and Korean martial arts, at least in the USA at the time [Krug 2001; Nitta 2010]. The authors he most liked to quote, paraphrase or borrow from were primarily interlocutors of East Asian philosophical ideas, such as Jiddu Krishnamurti, Alan Watts, and the unsung author of his all-time favourite expression (‘walk on’), Christmas Humphreys [Humphreys 1947; Bishop 2004; Bowman 2013c]. He clearly wanted to be seen as an East Asian wise man. As Barrowman’s own mention of Lee quoting a Zen parable shows, he put in considerable work, in interviews, articles and on-screen, to make sure that viewers and readers would view him, precisely, as an Oriental Sage (and not an ‘American’ or ‘Western’ philosopher).

I myself explored Lee’s words and recorded deeds not in relation to the national or cultural ‘ownership’ of Lee but in relation to various problematics, such as those around pedagogy, institutions, knowledge and mastery. I did so via deconstruction not because I thought Bruce Lee was ‘doing poststructuralism’ but because I thought that the deconstructive approach to the question of what was going on here was most illuminating. In doing so, I sought to cast light on similar histories and problems as they were encountered in different but equivalent ways by other pedagogical institutions, such as the university – the world in which I worked.

What I wanted to do was work out the ways that such institutions as universities dealt with challenges to stability and change. This is because, unlike Žižek, I believe that if you change society’s institutions this way or that, there will be significant, meaningful and consequential knock-on effects. Some changes will be predictable, others unpredictable [Bowman 2007b]. Institutions radiate planned and unplanned effects both within and beyond their own formal spaces and demarcations. If society’s institutions become more infused with certain values or principles, this constitutes a significant ethical and political change.

I sought to line up Bruce Lee with and against certain other thinkers, movements and milieu of the 1960s and early 1970s – ‘1968’ was a key evocative date – because it seemed both provocative and responsible to try to historicize Lee’s outlooks, beliefs, ideologies, actions and efforts in terms of broader historical contexts and movements. To fail to historicize or contextualise in this way is a mistake, even if such figures or such texts go on to have diverse – even contradictory – effects in multiple contexts around the world and over time. Failing to historicise and contextualise is undoubtedly part of what has led some people to regard Lee as some kind of transcategorically unique genius and to produce hagiographies that seem unaware of the lack of originality of many of ‘Bruce Lee’s’ ideas, skills and innovations.

CONTEXTUAL LEE

When you historicise and contextualise someone’s work and words and projects, it often makes them look less than unique, and much more of the zeitgeist. Such is definitely the case with Lee. He lived in a time and place where questioning tradition was in the ascendant. Admittedly, many Westerners who were questioning Western traditions were turning East and walking into precisely the kinds of martial arts clubs that Bruce Lee was critiquing. This irony is what led to a simultaneous erosion and intensification of ‘traditional’ Asian martial arts practices.

This was also the era of the formation of both deconstruction and cultural studies – along with many other things. So, in my work, I lined up Lee with cultural studies and deconstruction for comparative (and contrastive) reasons. Via this gesture to a historical period, and the possibility or proposal of a shared milieu or zeitgeist, I sought to place Bruce Lee into a context. The context I constructed, as shown in my very first quotation at the start of this discussion, was one suggested by the Žižekian-Marxist challenge that all such things are symptomatic responses to a certain stage of capitalism.

6 This is an approach to culture and politics that owes much to Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony – a theory that provided the bedrock for the political theory of cultural studies as it emerged in the British context, also during the 1960s. ‘Radical’ thinkers such as Žižek, in their worst moments, regard anything less than complete proletarian revolution on the basis of the class antagonism to be ‘epiphenomenal’ or ‘interpassive’ non-change. I have written about and against this position at length elsewhere [Bowman 2007b, 2008].
I could have formulated the context and the question in other ways, could have posed other questions about it, and could have included other items as part of that context. Any context can be reformulated and reworked on the basis of adding, removing or reconstruing bits of information, regarding it from different positions, premises or values, and having different aims and objectives. The objective inevitability of perspectival variation (context as constructed) is the ontological condition of possibility for deconstruction. It is also the reason why so much can be said and thought about so many things, including someone (or something) like Bruce Lee: what does he become if we are aware of this or that, if we place more significance on this and less on that, if we interpret this word or deed or decision this way or that?

As mentioned, the Žižekian-Marxist critique posed a stark challenge to the political and intellectual value of many of the things that I held dear: cultural studies as a ‘political’ project [Hall 1992], deconstruction as a ‘method’ of cultural studies (despite what Derrida repeatedly said about deconstruction not being a ‘method’ and not having anything to do with cultural studies [Cohen 2003; Bennington and Derrida 2008]), and Bruce Lee as an agent of cultural change. Putting these things under the microscope of Žižek’s challenge forced me to ask difficult questions about them. As part of the same process, I was able to put Žižek’s own approach under the microscope too.

I have said all of this, many times before. I even say it quite clearly in the passages that Barrowman cites as evidence that I said either the opposite or some caricatured version of it. But, most certainly, Bruce Lee was not a poststructuralist. Nonetheless, to add something to my earlier arguments: it remains possible to argue that his energies and orientations can be interpreted in line with an analysis offered by Rey Chow of the status of poststructuralism and postcolonialism as academic fields emerging in more and more universities from the late 1970s.

In her assessment, poststructuralism and postcolonialism in the universities can be seen as part of the long march through social institutions of certain movements and struggles that had started elsewhere – specifically, in post-colonial contexts. So, although Bruce Lee is neither a poststructuralist nor a postcolonialist, the anti-institutional and anti-status quo impulses and energies of both popular and academic movements cannot be cleanly disentangled. A whole lot was changing and emerging at that time (as ever!). Nothing was or is clean or pure. Everything is intermingling, intertwining – although in my visualisation of this situation, I see it all as being less ‘like water’ and more like what you see when you look at a lava lamp.

7 Hopefully this answers Barrowman’s peculiar question: ‘Can Bowman refute a claim made by Derrida?’ The answer is, of course, yes. Deconstruction can and does generate a range of methods.

POSTSTRUCTURALISM VERSUS POSTSTRUCTURALISM

I just mentioned Rey Chow. Readers unfamiliar with her work should know that Chow is a superlative and exemplary practitioner of poststructuralist thinking, who is nonetheless often highly critical of many of the arguments and positions of other cultural critics and analysts, including those that certain simplistic and simplifying approaches would lump together as (if) one and the same entity, called ‘poststructuralism’ or (worse) ‘the poststructuralists’. For instance, she has explicitly, and in some depth, disagreed wholeheartedly with arguments made by the likes of the early Kristeva [Chow 1991], Derrida [Chow 1995a], the early Foucault [Chow 2002], and many others. In my own work – especially my work on Bruce Lee but also on martial arts and martial arts studies more generally – Chow has played a huge role, arguably much more significant than Derrida or perhaps anyone else.

It was in Rey Chow’s work on the transnational circulation of film and other media, on the problems with and problematics of cultural studies, postcolonial studies, film studies, Chinese literary studies, and more, that I found a subtle and sophisticated set of theoretical tools necessary to make sense of someone – or something – as complex as ‘Bruce Lee’ (as ‘he’ exists in and as texts and discourses). And it was also Chow who taught me a huge amount about how to read, use and critique such vital and vitalising theoretical forces as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gayatri Spivak, Slavoj Žižek, Julia Kristeva, and so on. The key is not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. That is, one might say, to absorb what is useful, reject what is useless and add what is specifically your own. The way to do that is through close reading, careful steps, and precise conclusions [Bowman 2013a], not through the production of all-or-nothing binaries which tend to feed a polemical or polemicizing bloodlust (polemos) at the expense of relating sensitively (eros) to the true complexities and nuances of actual situations and relations [see also Derrida 1996/1998, 1998].

Of course, crude binaries can arise and exert a real influence, even when and where we least expect them – and even when we actively want to militate against them. Derrida, for instance, always insisted that we should resist the temptation to reduce difference to opposition. And yet, as his first translator, Gayatri Spivak, noted in her Translator’s Preface to Of Grammatology, Derrida himself drew a very strong distinction between written European languages with alphabets and the pictographic written language of Chinese. This constituted an inaugural gesture in Derrida’s text, one that Spivak immediately problematized [Derrida 1967/1976]. Put differently, the inaugural gesture of deconstruction in Of Grammatology is both undeconstructed and non-deconstructive, and is one that Derrida’s very first translator, in the opening pages of this influential text of deconstruction/
poststructuralism disagrees with and challenges. (Very many people have noticed this. It is telling that Barrowman missed it, or that he or his paradigm is not equipped to do anything with it.)

A simplistic or simplifying thinker might conclude from this that because Derrida himself engages in the ‘othering’ of Chinese writing, and that rather than interrogating this gesture he turns instead to study many canonical works produced in Europe, ‘therefore’ this is a performative self-contradiction that means deconstruction is ‘illogical’ and cannot ‘logically’ exist. (Barrowman is clear: it is our responsibility ‘to refuse to countenance performative contradictions or to confer rationality onto self-refuting arguments’. Let’s remember that.)

A slightly more sophisticated assessment of the situation, however, might note that although this enabling gesture of deconstruction is undeconstructed and non-deconstructive in that moment, and although it is clearly possible to see that Derrida himself turned much of his early attention to influential texts in the European tradition in order to unpick and problematize the ways they were constructed and oriented, this certainly does not make him or his work Eurocentric. Nor does it make deconstruction illogical, self-contradictory, hypocritical or impossible. In actual fact, the approach to reading and analysis developed in Of Grammatology is widely acknowledged as having stimulated and orientated a huge amount of anti-Eurocentric work, in the field of postcolonial studies in particular, and more widely [Chow 2001, 2011].

As many (myself included) have argued, one of the key aims of any deconstruction is the drawing into visibility of cultural, intellectual and institutional biases. It is from this that all of the claims about deconstruction are made. It is clearly possible to see that Derrida himself turned much of his early attention to influential texts in the European tradition in order to unpick and problematize the ways they were constructed and oriented, this certainly does not make him or his work Eurocentric. Nor does it make deconstruction illogical, self-contradictory, hypocritical or impossible. In actual fact, the approach to reading and analysis developed in Of Grammatology is widely acknowledged as having stimulated and orientated a huge amount of anti-Eurocentric work, in the field of postcolonial studies in particular, and more widely [Chow 2001, 2011].

As many (myself included) have argued, one of the key aims of any deconstruction is the drawing into visibility of cultural, intellectual and institutional biases. It is from this that all of the claims about poststructuralist politics and ethics derive. Necessarily, the person who delivers a critique of another's text, position or institution will themselves be creating or relying on a text, position or institution from which to stage the critique. Because it has been constructed, this means that it itself can be deconstructed. It will be constructed in a time, a place, from investments, ideas, theories, beliefs, ideologies, targets, hostilities, resentments, and all the rest of it. People from other times, places, contexts, and situations will see, think, perceive, feel, imagine and theorise differently.

There is no ‘beautiful soul’, looking down, hovering purely, over and above, outside of and uncorrupted by the real low-down dirt and messiness of all manner of social, cultural, ideological and institutional forces and factors. This goes for me as much as it went for Bruce Lee as for Jacques Derrida as for Kyle Barrowman. The spread, success and infamy of Derridean deconstruction at a certain time cannot be divorced from social, cultural and institutional transformations that it both reflected and was part of. In many ways ‘deconstruction’ and ‘Derrida’ (not to mention ‘cultural studies’ and ‘media studies’) became scapegoats for moral panic about cultural values and the crisis of the humanities and/or university and/or/as society [Derrida and Weber 1995; Hall 1992, 1990]. Similarly, although there are plenty of hagiographies of Bruce Lee which paint him as a progressive revolutionary and saviour [Little 2001; Bolelli 2003; Bishop 2004; Lee and Little 2018], he has also been held by figures (eminent and otherwise) from Smith and Draeger to many modern-day bloggers, vloggers and online commentators, as having caused a terrible decline, corruption and bastardization of the martial arts [Smith 1999].

**INFLUENTIAL LEE**

What is clear is that each of the items I initially singled out for comparison and contrast in terms of Žižek’s critique – Bruce Lee, deconstruction, cultural studies – had profound and wide-ranging effects in the world. The impacts of Bruce Lee on martial arts cultures and practices are still being felt. His intervention is impossible to measure objectively, because it cannot be demarcated or quantified. The impacts of the inter- and anti-disciplinary approaches of cultural studies and deconstruction (among other things) have similarly reconfigured many academic contexts. There were positive and negative, affiliative and hostile reactions to all of the above. How we feel about them is irrelevant. Whether we like them or not, they happened. My interest was in trying to establish and assess their political and cultural significance.

In their respective realms and in different ways, we could say that poststructuralism, cultural studies and Bruce Lee each altered disciplinarity. Bruce Lee wanted to rationalise martial arts practices, moving away from ‘tradition without reason’ and towards a drive for effectiveness and efficiency. Deconstruction wanted to unpick the unarticulated biases that structured Western philosophical traditions. Cultural studies wanted to rethink cultural values and hierarchies in all manner of social and institutional contexts. But (with the possible exception of deconstruction vis-à-vis ‘philosophy’) they did not proceed in the manner that I once proposed to call ‘alterdisciplinary’.

Nonetheless, Barrowman engages with alterdisciplinarity by jamming my earlier theorisation of one possible logic or tactic of academic ‘political’ (qua institutional) intervention into a discussion of my later treatment of Bruce Lee. However, alterdisciplinarity was a neologism that I coined (others may have used the term but I cannot find an earlier published usage than my own) as the culmination of a long process of trying to work out how academics in cultural studies might seek to make an effective intervention into any context other than their own
disciplinary confines. In other words, it was the end result of one of my earliest and longest running problematics. It was not the starting point of my entry into what we now call martial arts studies. Both are different. Alterdisciplinarity was animated more by polemos; martial arts studies more by eros.

As Barrowman notes, I developed my argument about alterdisciplinarity out of frustration with many cultural studies academics’ faith in the value of critique as a way to intervene into debates and issues in other academic and cultural realms. Stated bluntly: what is the point in publishing an article about economic theory or policy in a cultural studies journal that is not read by economists or policymakers – especially an article laden down with the arguments of and quotations from more or less obscure theorists, philosophers and scholars they may not know or care to know?

My suggestion was simply that if people such as ‘radical’ cultural theorists really do care about the political and economic issues that they incessantly hold forth about, then shouldn’t they make some effort to engage with the most relevant constituencies – economists, policy-makers, scientists, etc. To be heard by people who work in other fields, I argued, you have to speak in their language, use their arguments, their terms, and show – in their own terms – or rather, via a persuasive deconstruction of their own terms – how their conclusions may be wrong and why other conclusions should be reached.

It’s a simple argument and it may indeed be naïve or impractical, but I proposed it in the context of an ongoing discourse within cultural studies, cultural theory and political theory about ‘intervention’. It was offered as a challenge to those who often claimed cultural studies to be a political project and hence sought to intervene into the wider social, cultural and political world. ‘Alterdisciplinarity’ theorised academics as being streamed and enclaved into discrete disciplinary networks, which do not necessarily bleed into each other or connect up directly (or in terms of the content and knowledge that they produce) with other social and political institutions.

Each discipline has its technical languages and concepts, established processes and protocols of conduct, shared points of reference, residual, dominant and emergent paradigms, methodologies, and metalanguages, and so on. In short, each discipline has its own language-games. My argument theorised communication across such professionalised and enclaved borders and boundaries as being tricky, precisely because of the differences in all of these matters. Technical languages, metalanguages, disciplinary-specific protocols and standards of verification and proof, and so on, may all work to oil the wheels of communication between people who share the conventions, the insider-knowledge, and the investments and values of the shared projects of the disciplinary discourse. But the flipside of a shared technical language and investment in a project is that none of it is necessarily transparent to those who are not fluent in it at all. Sharing in common, the production of an ‘inside’, also produces an exclusion, an ‘outside’.

Communication across disciplinary boundaries is tricky. In my mind I had images of unapologetic high theorists arguing the toss with quantum physicists and neuroscientists about the kinds of things cultural theorists want to argue about, such as ‘phallologocentricity’, for instance. While it is not impossible, even today, to argue that something is phallologocentric, it would involve quite a labour of explanation and translation to explain it thoroughly to anyone outside of psychoanalytically-informed cultural theory. This is because different discourses and different communicative communities and contexts have different paradigms, languages and metalanguages. There is not one paradigm and not one metalanguage. There are many. Which means that there is not one overarching one, but there are several, some of whose adherents may even believe that they are following the one true paradigm, the one true approach. Barrowman’s misunderstanding of all of this really is truly spectacular.

Barrowman believes that he has found, or constructed, his own personal one true paradigm with his hybridisation of Rand and Emerson and his claim that their ‘philosophies’ are in line with each other, and that Bruce Lee’s ‘philosophy’ is in line with theirs too. Certainly, we have already established that Bruce Lee’s thinking is organised by an anti-institutional impulse (along with a few other impulses, such as the drive to self-orientalise, to self-aggrandize, to play the wise old sage or guru, to publicly disparage all other approaches to martial arts than his own, and so on). We have also established (as we always knew) that his thinking falls far short of the form, content and quality of poststructuralism.\(^8\) Does this mean he measures up to or can be aligned with Barrowman’s newly minted hybrid seam of American philosophy?

\(^8\) Nonetheless, it is only in one footnote that Barrowman notices that in one free-standing book chapter I argue explicitly and at length that Bruce Lee and Jacques Derrida could not possibly be said to be aligned in their approaches, styles, ethics, pragmatics or conclusions. It is perhaps only because that book chapter is focused so entirely, for so long, and so explicitly on the question of what kind of martial art deconstruction would be if it were really a martial art, that my argument finally, briefly, gets through what otherwise appears to be a form of reading (or refusal to read) characterised by a hypertrophic confirmation bias. Unfortunately, in perceiving it, Barrowman classifies what is actually the tip of an iceberg as being a small piece of floating ice, and he deems it to be yet another instance of Bowman contradicting himself – when in actual fact it is consistent with everything I have ever argued in that regard.
BRUCE LEE, AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER

Occasionally, Barrowman paints an interesting and significantly different picture of Bruce Lee to any that have been painted before. In a paper he gave at the 'Bruce Lee's Cultural Legacies' conference in July 2018, he went even further than he does in the present article, lining up passages from thinkers such as Emerson, Rand and others alongside passages penned by Lee, suggesting that they share so many similarities in form, tone and content that they often feel as if each could have been written by any of the others. Then as now, Barrowman made this claim in order to situate Bruce Lee's manner of thinking and writing in relation to an American tradition, rather than – as is the more usual tendency – to associate Lee with East Asian thought and philosophy.

All of this is extremely provocative and stimulating, although I feel he may be trying to do too much at once in asking readers to (1) revalue the status of Emerson, (2) accept Rand's thoughts and arguments as being of equal status to those of a revalued Emerson, and (3) place Bruce Lee on the same newly-mainstreamed level, as a bona fide American Philosopher.

So, let us start from the more modest and defensible observation, that Bruce Lee's words often read a lot like Emerson or Rand. This in itself gives ample food for thought. From my own perspective, although I have often reflected on Lee's reliance on Western-authored, English-language treatments of East Asian philosophies as the sources of many of his ideas, I had never reflected on the similarities between Lee's ways of thinking and writing and any figures in one or another American tradition. So, Barrowman's argument struck me as hugely interesting, adding extra dimensions, and raising extra sets of questions. Thanks to this argument, Lee proves himself to be unfolding once again as an 'object of knowledge' rather than an 'object of consumption': a text that is never finished, never exhausted, and from which ever more meanings and significances can be produced [Knorr-Cetina 1981; Spatz 2015].

Although I had long read Bruce Lee's texts as being aligned with (or as trying to be aligned with) a Daoist orientation, via his self-conscious identification with a Daoist tradition of thought – in other words, although I had read Bruce Lee's texts with absolute fidelity to his own explicitly declared and perceptibly obvious intentions and other actions (such as teaching courses on East Asian philosophy to Linda's class at college, etc.) – Barrowman's repositioning of Lee as aligned with an American philosophical tradition reads him against the grain of his own authorial intention. This is ironic because, relentlessly railing against 'the poststructuralists' (especially Roland Barthes), Barrowman has always argued for the primacy and sanctity of authorial intention as being the first and last word on what a text means and how it should be read. Yet his own reading of Bruce Lee (to use one of his own phrases) 'shockingly and affrontingly' transgresses all of that. In providing a 'corrective' reading, he constructs a completely foreign and 'other' Bruce Lee.

This 'American othering' of Lee unarguably goes against Lee's own authorial intention. Admittedly, authorial intention is often tricky to establish (to say the least), especially in the modernist literary texts that Barthes studied [Barthes 1977] or across the vast historical, linguistic and culturalchasms from Plato/Socrates to the present that Derrida discussed [Derrida 1987]. Consequently, any claim we make about the intended meanings of authors must derive from assessing all of the available, relevant and most pertinent textual evidence. Things may become even more difficult when we have to deliberate what is relevant and what not, what is pertinent, what constitutes evidence and how that evidence is to be read. But in this case, things are pretty clear-cut.

Deconstruction's obsessive attention to such crucial matters has led to it being written off as too digressive or too excessive to be 'useful' in some fields [Akerström Andersen 2003]. However, by the same token, it is also what has led to it being regarded as of the utmost usefulness and practicality in other fields, such as law, legal studies and jurisprudence [see Critchley in Bowman 2003].

Barrowman's rewriting of Lee goes against his authorial intention insofar as this can be reconstructed from historical evidence and thereby undermines Barrowman's premises so completely that it not only blunts but actually breaks all of the axes he ceaselessly grinds against poststructuralism. We will see whether, upon reading this, Barrowman will immediately implode in a puff of scuppered logic, which of course should happen if, as he regularly asserts, it is simply impossible to continue whenever something logically contradictory appears to have happened. Or maybe – just maybe – the world (or at least the process of theory development) doesn't work like that.

In any case, Barrowman seeks to paint Lee as a successful or perfectly fine example of a certain American tradition of thinking and writing. This proposed 'tradition', itself running from Emerson to Rand to Lee, may strike some readers as either controversial, or entirely invented in Barrowman's own mind, or motivated by some agenda. But in aligning Lee with these 'Americans', he evidently feels that it satisfactorily redresses 'my' painting of Bruce Lee as a poststructuralist and everyone else's painting of him as a champion of East Asian thought. Of course, I never painted Lee as a poststructuralist. Indeed, I have always – from the outset – painted Lee as a rather limited critical thinker, considerably inferior to any recognisably poststructuralist thinker.
Against this, the fact that Barrowman regards Lee’s thought as apparently unproblematic once it is read as a kind of Emersonian or Randian philosophy should raise alarm bells about rigour. If the cool-sounding, vaguely Daoist, largely borrowed, self-help new-age formulations of this egocentric 1960s hippy Hollywood wannabe can somehow pass as high-level critical thinking in the Emersonian or Randian tradition, then, frankly, that should tell us everything we need to know about this tradition or paradigm. It is ‘lite’.

 Appropriately but unfortunately enough, we see this ‘lite’ approach to thinking, analysis, and communication reflected in Barrowman’s work. After ‘poststructuralism’ has been filtered through the simplifying binarizing prism and against the drag factor of his own organising rubric, we hit rock bottom with claims such as ‘the fundamental presuppositions of poststructuralism are that the concept of objectivity is an illusion and that the corollary concept of truth is … “metaphysical”’. This is absolutely incorrect, as is virtually everything else Barrowman says about ‘poststructuralism’. There is no space to give another ‘Deconstruction 101’ lecture here. But put it this way: in my own most sustained engagement with ‘poststructuralism’ – or my own most ‘poststructuralist’ moment – in the pages of Post-Marxism versus Cultural Studies [2007] – the word ‘illusion’ occurs twice, and never in relation to objectivity, truth, or reality. 10

So, let me be clear, for readers who have not read a lot of poststructuralist work: Barrowman’s caricature of a poststructuralist position or argument categorically bears no resemblance to any argument of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, or any other poststructuralist thinker. Period. It does however have all the hallmarks of the most febrile and reactionary, confused and uncomprehending first wave of responses to the first English-language translations of certain French thinkers, especially, of course, to the work of Jean Baudrillard.

But Baudrillard was a postmodernist thinker, a rather pessimistic thinker of the media age, and was working within a different discourse and different set of problems. This is not to say that Baudrillard should be dismissed, of course. Many of our most contemporary social and political, pragmatic and epistemological problems seem to have been predicted, theorised and analysed by the work of thinkers like Jean Baudrillard in the 1980s. Think of the claims and counterclaims about what is and what is not ‘fake news’ and indeed what ‘fake news’ is, which emerged around the time of the election of Donald Trump as president of the USA. Perhaps we have written off Baudrillard too soon. Nevertheless, let’s stick with Derrida. Derrida responded repeatedly and at length to the frequent accusations of his nihilism, of his alleged lack of belief in reality or objectivity, and so on, all the way through the 1980s and after [Bowman 2013b, 2015, 2016a]. At great length, he laid out the ways in which these accusations were misguided and misconstrued. Derrida can be said to have ‘believed in’ reality, in the real world, in real people, in having face-to-face conversations with people, in closely studying the texts he loved, in arguing for the social, political, ethical and educational causes he believed in and against people, positions, projects and problems he disagreed with, and all the rest of it. Indeed, he often said as much. And he frequently clarified that his ontological proposition was merely that we always have to read and interpret the world that we encounter – we always do anyway, whether we’re conscious of it or not – so our encounters with everything, including ourselves, are in a sense the same as our encounters with texts. There is nothing to Derrida outside of that.

Importantly, no one is exempt from the necessity and inescapable inevitability of interpretation and of working out how to make sense of things, particularly not arbiters of objectivity like scientists and judges [Godzich in De Man 1986: xiv–xvii; Godzich 1994; Bowman 2007b: 43–44]. In fact, the social institutions of the scientist and the judge each require the ever-greater technical refinement of ways of measuring and interpreting reality [Lyotard 1984: 44–46; Bowman 2007b: 21–23]. Hence, the scientist seeks out better technologies to measure and establish the properties of aspects of reality, the judge calls on experts, psychologists, psychiatrists, criminologists, who are regarded as having the technical ability to know the truth or reality of a subject, along with ‘reliable’ character witnesses regarded as having a requisite level of moral probity to be trusted, and so on.

Each of these – both the technological and moral aspects – is organised by a paradigm and a theory within a paradigm. A piece of scientific kit is in one sense the physical manifestation of a certain theory about which way to visualise and measure what that theory deems analytically pertinent. An expert is schooled in one or more disciplinary approach.

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9 For any who desire a point-by-point breakdown of Barrowman’s misreading of deconstruction, Evelina Kazakevičiūtė is currently working on a chapter of her PhD that carries this out. This work will in due course appear on Cardiff University’s open access repository (ORCA).

10 One occurrence is this: ‘secretly Rorty buys into the philosophical illusion that philosophy is a subversive and dangerous activity’ [Bowman 2007: 132]; the other is a quotation from Lola Young, in which she says ‘It is an illusion to believe that cultural studies could ever become something other than institutionalized once it set foot inside an institution: there is little scope for transgression or operating outside of disciplining structures and practices in most universities’ [Young quoted in Bowman 2007: 187].
to a subject. All of these are contingent, historically specific, and variable. A different expert may well have a different paradigm and methodology, and hence produce different results that point to different verdicts.

None of this ever stays the same. The history of science is littered with discarded theories and methods that were once regarded as objective truths and realities [Kuhn 1962]. Psychological paradigms and methods of establishing reality vary widely, even wildly [Foucault 1976, 1995; Ronson 2011]. And this ineluctable truth, it seems, is true of all things. If there is one objective reality that we can somehow prove to be true, then how is it that there is no global consensus on such matters as the best diet, the best exercise regimen, the best way to teach, the best way to train, the best way to fight, the best way to think, the best way to understand things – anything?

To bring this back to Bruce Lee: readers will most likely be aware that he famously posed the rhetorical question: as we only have two hands and two feet, how many ways to fight can there be? His answer: one, obviously! We just need to work it out. The actual empirical answer given by the world, however, is this: thousands, possibly millions, possibly billions, in ever-expanding, ever-changing permutations and permutations.

Given Lee’s limited and often faulty reasoning, a ‘logical’/Barrowman (Boolean) option might be to discount, dismiss and trash Lee’s [insert hyperbolically judgemental adverb here] way of thinking and entire project, tout court. My way, however, has always been to stage a close analysis of the argument, the logic underpinning it, explore its vicissitudes, assess it in terms of a sense of its historical and cultural contexts, the grudges or problems that seemed to inspire it, the imperatives it seemed to be animated by, and (in the case of Bruce Lee) the fact that, whether right or wrong, idealistic or simplistic, it was so hugely influential in the ongoing movements of the martial arts world.

In other words, I have explored Bruce Lee’s thinking and its very real cultural consequences or legacies. There is no need to cover the same ground again here. Similarly, this is not the place to discuss jurisprudence, science or objectivity ‘in general’. I have done so at some length elsewhere, too, in work that was informed by multiple poststructuralist scholars [Lytard 1984; De Man 1986; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Weber 1987; Godzich 1994; Bowman 2007b]. One wonders why Barrowman neglects to discuss me or any of the other authors on whom my own work relies on any of the points he raises.

One also wonders about the status of ‘objectivity’ in his work. For instance, he neglects to provide a single example of a pertinent unchanging universally known objective truth. Claims about the objective obviousness of observations and perceptions, derived from a ‘philosopher’, without even cursory reference to anything outside of her texts (such as studies of perceptions in relation to objectivity, perhaps, or Boolean versus fuzzy logic) quite frankly fly in the face of science – indeed scholarship – itself. To claim that objectivity is obvious and that obviousness boils down to a perception is to occupy a fundamentally anti-intellectual and anti-philosophical stance. It amounts to anti-science, anti-scholarship, and an anti-intellectualism that not only opens the door but actively encourages hostility towards dissenting voices, such as those based on different perceptions.

In Barrowman’s rendition, ‘objectivism’ can be said to boil down to a range of refusals. It is all about what you cannot think or say, what is not allowed to be countenanced or taken seriously. Much like Barrowman’s inability to perceive that I really have not depicted Bruce Lee as a poststructuralist, or indeed to perceive that there isn’t really one poststructuralist, the ‘philosophy’ of objectivism appears to be working as a shield against looking at actual examples or fields in which the constitution of objectivity is explored as a possibility, such as any branch of science, whose paradigms, as we know, frequently change.

Is this because science is perfectionist? Maybe. ‘Perfectionism’ in the sense of always striving to close the asymptotic curve between knowledge of the real and the real or reality ‘itself’ could be one way of expressing a certain ideal of all science. Similarly, of course, the poststructuralist political philosophy of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (whose work has always informed my own ‘poststructuralist’ thinking but which Barrowman never engages) discusses the idea of ‘perfectibility’ in the democratic realm on multiple occasions and in great theoretical depth [Mouffe 1996, 2005]. But so fully has any counter-example that might problematise his own picture been pushed down (repressed?) that nothing like this ever surfaces in his work. Rather, throughout his work, Barrowman directs his attention to a philosophy of human self-perfection. In other words, this ‘philosophy’ is apprehended and applied by Barrowman as little more than a repository of superego injunctions, prohibitions and self-help mantras. Yet this seems appropriate: for this entire ‘philosophy’ actually really only has the hallmarks of pure pop psychologism.

PERFECTIONIST LEE

Bruce Lee was a perfectionist, we are told. In ‘philosophical’ terms, this is said to involve the tenet that humans are already immanently ‘perfect’ and should be judged on the basis of their individual decisions and the moral use of their intellect. In psychological terms, perfectionism is a character trait, sometimes associated with obsessive compulsive disorders. The philosophical tenet that individuals should strive to
actualise their perfection would seem to translate rather easily into the world of self-help mantras, sayings and platitudes of the type often employed and clearly enjoyed not only by Bruce Lee but also by contemporary television adverts for anything from buying insurance to wearing trainers to buying sanitary towels.

Appealing to a self-actualisation ethos has been picked up and used by everyone from pacifist post-Spinozan philosophers to the ‘be all you can be’ advertising slogans of the military [Brown 1997], to ‘thought for the day’ soundbites of all orders, and way beyond. It is certainly not the exclusive property of any one philosopher, and certainly not Ayn Rand. If anything, over the last few decades, one might say that, philosophically- and objectively-speaking, this terrain has been occupied by philosophers and theorists informed by the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. Indeed, it is very hard to find any positive feel-good messages in Rand, whose work is made up principally of embittered rants against a world that is regarded resentfully as being not as it ‘should’ be.

But enough of Rand, for the moment. Let’s return to Bruce Lee. Bruce Lee was certainly physically and choreographically astonishing. But perfect? Or becoming perfect? Physically, intellectually or morally? There are so many issues and problems with these propositions that I am going to have to limit myself to merely posing some questions – questions whose explorations would lead us in some very different directions to those of people who want to read Bruce Lee as either objectively or subjectively perfectionist.

For instance, if Lee was on a path of perfectionism, how do we square this with the fact that he had surgery to remove the sweat glands from his armpits for entirely cosmetic reasons (to look good on film), took steroids (again, for reasons of cosmetic vanity), would not stop taking recreational drugs despite doctors’ orders, reputedly had extramartial affairs, over-trained and also trained so incorrectly as to encounter a potentially life-changing injury while performing what should have been a straightforward and uncomplicated lift? He was also reputedly constantly frustrated that, despite his own best (self-invented) efforts, he could not add muscle mass to his legs. What kind of perfectionism is any of this? It all seems to align ‘being perfect’ with immense narcissism, surgical self-modification for vanity, chemical experimentation, and conscious and deliberate infidelity (aka ‘hypocritical self-contradiction’), transgressing vows one consciously made, uncoerced, by oneself.

Of course, none of this is relevant to my reading of Bruce Lee, which is focused on exploring the cultural impact of his films and texts; but it is hugely significant to Barrowman’s approach, which focuses on a fetishized individual called Bruce Lee, someone we are encouraged to believe we could possibly have unmediated access to the truth of, and who we are enjoined to place on a pedestal.

More pertinent to me, or my approach, is using what we know of Lee and his effects to think through issues, questions and problems within culture, or at least within cultural studies. One of these may perhaps be the question of ‘individualism’. Barrowman wants to read Lee as an exemplary neoliberal self-entrepreneurial subject. And that’s fine: such subjects exist, and Bruce Lee’s time and place was arguably their ideological crucible.

Yet, on the matter of Lee’s perfectionist, moral, self-determining individualism – and, reciprocally, on not following the pack, it needs to be asked: if Bruce Lee was an individualist, how did he become obsessed with being famous – as famous as Steve McQueen? And how could it possibly be said that Lee’s ‘personal’ or ‘individual’ drive for fame was not an expression and outcome of the shared dream for fame that is fostered in a culture that worships celebrity? Objectively speaking, how many people have flocked, like Lee, individually yet en masse to Los Angeles, with a shared dream of making it big in Hollywood? Individualism is a collective phenomenon. It is mass produced. And it cannot be consistent or coherent all the way down or all the way through. All individuals are constituted collectively, reliant on others, in and of, within or from, and always in relation to a group.

And finally: if Bruce Lee was such a great objectivist thinker, then how come the reality of combat has never come to be universally agreed as being simple and direct? Or, put differently, how come no one can agree on what ‘simple’ and ‘direct’ looks like, means, or is enacted in any or every context? How come jeet kune do itself had multiple strategies for entry, and exists in so many competing forms across different schools? Shouldn’t there be only one ‘obviously’ true manifestation of JKD?

These are just some of the many questions that occur to me, but there is neither time nor space to examine properly here. Nor is there really any need to do so, as I have already discussed almost all of these matters before, in great detail and at great length, across several books and multiple chapters and articles.
CONCLUSION
FACING UP TO REPRESSIONS

In conclusion, phrased as simply as possible to try to limit the possibility for misinterpretation, let me say that I agree that we could and should reflect further on the status of Bruce Lee as emerging from, within and feeding into different discourses, confluences, contexts, impulses and orientations. As I have argued before, to borrow a formulation from Roland Barthes, Bruce Lee is eternal to me and others not because he means one thing to many people but because he means many things to any one person. Barrowman sometimes expresses annoyance or irritation at the claiming of Bruce Lee for this or that group or identity – whether that be an ethnic, class, regional, national, or any other kind of group or identity. And yet he wants to somehow address that mistake or crime by making exactly the same (re)claiming move himself: by claiming Bruce Lee for a very particular seam of American thought – a seam that Barrowman seems to want to claim he has merely ‘discovered’, but which he is clearly keen on inventing and establishing, himself.

It is well known that historical knowledge is never neutral. Historical facts do not just sit there, inert and innocent. Quite to the contrary, historical material is always worked over, always configured in certain ways, always called into the service of this or that narrative, this or that identity, ethos or project [Said 2005]. Derrida called it teleiopoeisis: the manipulation of ideas of history to paint a picture of the imagined journey we have taken from the past to the present, an imagined journey that implies an identity for ‘us’, an orientation, and a trajectory – history is always used as a story about where we should be going [Derrida 1997; Mowitt 2003].

So where have we been – or where do we think we have been – and where ‘therefore’ do we think we should (or could) be going? I agree we have often associated Bruce Lee’s thought and ideas with Eastern philosophy – or, in my own reading of the situation, with Western translations, interlocutors and interpreters of Eastern philosophy. Yet, couldn’t we – shouldn’t we – articulate his thinking with an American tradition? If not, why not?

If we want to do this, then we have a responsibility to ask which venerable American philosophers would seem to be appropriate, and we have a responsibility to give reasons for why we are doing this work. Barrowman proposes that he chooses to compare Bruce Lee to Emerson and Rand for two reasons: first because Lee’s words seem to suggest that he has a ‘profound affinity’ with these ‘arch-individualists’; and second because Emerson and Rand have been ‘repressed’ within the scholarly world. Barrowman implies that both Emerson and Rand, and therefore, by the same token, Bruce Lee, have been ‘repressed’ by the university academic environment because of the vindictive power of a left-leaning politically-correct consensus.

However, I would propose that the real reasons for the ‘exclusion’ of Emerson and Rand from the grand canon of American Philosophy are somewhat more prosaic – and we can see this clearly if we accept Barrowman’s argument and add Lee to their number. Doing so helps to clarify why these thinkers may have been excluded from the university philosophy syllabus. Looking at all three in terms of each other, the question emerges clearly: might it be that they never made it onto Philosophy 101 primary reading lists because they are not very good thinkers?

But, the retort will come: judged by what standards? Academic standards are always biases. Choosing a canon or writing a reading list for a syllabus always involves choosing what one believes to be the best and excluding things deemed inferior, irrelevant, or otherwise not pertinent. So, posed a different way, the question is: why would anyone expect texts by arch-individualist perfectionist objectivist ‘philosopher’ Bruce Lee to appear on any university syllabus? While this arch-individualist may have offered cutting edge ‘zeitgeisty’ anti-institutional formulations in a single martial arts magazine article, this does not constitute adequate grounds for becoming part of a great canon of philosophers. The fact that Lee actually – shall we say – seemed to ‘borrow’ most of his ideas from other sources does not help either. Where are we left when we realise that this self-help individualist simply helped himself to the work of others?

To be clear, then: maybe this is precisely why Emerson (perhaps) and Rand (definitely) are excluded from the philosophy syllabus: because they are not very good philosophers. The fact that Lee actually – shall we say – seemed to ‘borrow’ most of his ideas from other sources does not help either. Where are we left when we realise that this self-help individualist simply helped himself to the work of others?

Fighting Over Bruce Lee
Paul Bowman
The first American philosopher that springs to my mind is Richard Rorty – who, like Lee, argued for pragmatism in all thinking and the eradication of all pompous or pseudo-profound ideas. Or, if we have to go back to an earlier time, before American thought became corrupted by European influences like poststructuralism, perhaps Barrowman might allow himself to accept Charles Sanders Peirce’s arguments about our complex linguistically determined and hence contingent and cultural access to reality.

From a slightly different angle, there are also thinkers like Donna Haraway, whose interest in the postmodern technological production of the human relates so directly to Lee’s interest in different technologies (weights, electric charges, supplements, chemicals, etc.) to expand ‘human’ potentials. Or perhaps Judith Butler, whose interest in processes and ideas of social and self-becoming clearly chime with those of Bruce Lee. What about Seyla Benhabib in relation to migration? Or Lauren Berlant’s notion of the ‘combover subject’ – the way we all have of covering that thing about ourselves that we desperately try to hide from public view?

I could go on. There are multiple American thinkers and indeed ‘American’ traditions. Why choose the ones we do? What is the nature of our investments? How might they themselves be historicised, contextualised, psychoanalysed? In my own work on Bruce Lee, I have always tried to give reasons why – and to interrogate the reasons why – I was exploring this or that thinker or this or that question in relation to Bruce Lee. I have never stuffed my texts full to the brim with adjectival and adverbial ad hominem denunciation or hagiographic praise for real or imagined groups, sects, factions, or schools, en masse or tout court. I have always tried to respect both basic and more advanced protocols of reading (from simple semantics through to semiotics and on to deconstruction), so that I maintain a justifiable sense of what people’s positions and meanings actually are, based on the words they say or write, rather than ignoring some and stretching others out of their most obvious – i.e., literal and explicit – senses, whether ‘ordinary language’ or not. That has been my style and part of my way of trying to be responsible.

But sometimes, especially when faced with a polemical opponent who publicly ties their flag to the mast of the primacy of a crude Boolean ‘logic’ and declares the irredeemable hypocrisy of any ‘performative self-contradiction’ – especially one so fixated on an ‘all or nothing’ approach – it may be necessary to try harder to be simple and direct. If I were to do so in this context, I might start by asking where we are left, ‘logically’, when we are given the information that Ayn Rand – who railed so much and so bitterly against the supposed evils of reliance on others, on the welfare state, on communal interdependence, on collectivity, and so on – herself took welfare payments? For, what this would mean for an all-or-nothing ‘logical’ reader is that, despite her entire ‘philosophy’, by taking welfare payments, Ayn Rand enacted the most perfect performative contradiction of them all: the one that most efficiently, objectively and aesthetically not only practically but also symbolically proved the absolute and unmitigated wrongness of her thinking, and by the same token the true value of the collective, the community, the group, the institution.

So, we can wave goodbye to Rand. She does not qualify to be here. She does not pass muster. Neither according to my standards of rigour, coherence, or value, nor according to Barrowman’s own demand for sudden-death exclusion at the slightest whiff of ‘performative contradiction’. Good. I am glad. I do not like Rand’s writing, nor its nasty implications. But does this mean that I want therefore to shut the door on anything I don’t like – to kick Rand and her (performatively self-contradicting) followers out of my life, along with every other approach that I disagree with, until I am smiling and alone with the last woman or man standing?

Absolutely not. Insight, innovation, improvement, development, advance, strengthening, and so on, in the intellectual and academic worlds, all require listening closely and engaging thoroughly and respectfully with others. In this belief, Barrowman and I are actually aligned. It is just that I do not think that one should always try to beat the other. Nor do I even think that one can ever simply or truly know how to ‘absorb what is useful, reject what is useless and add what is specifically your own’. Rather, I think that the best one can do is to try to reflect on why what seems useful strikes us as such, why what seems useless does so (particularly if others do seem to think it is useful), and why one wants to add what one wants to add – and whether that is, in fact, simply one’s own.

Put differently, and to mine the reserves of one of Bruce Lee’s favourite Zen-style expressions: whereas Barrowman seems to want first to ‘fill his cup’ with a sense of rightness and righteousness, before beginning, and to empty it only by pouring it down onto his opponents, I tend to think that deconstruction may offer a way to help us empty our own cups, in order to begin.

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See also George Jennings’ article in this issue, which links Bruce Lee to philosophical pragmatism.
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FROM THE DRAGON TO THE BEAST
THE MARTIAL MONK AND VIRTUAL NINJA AS ACTUAL MARTIAL ARTISTS

CHRIS GOTO-JONES

ABSTRACT
Navigating between society’s moral panics about the influence of violent videogames and philosophical texts about self-cultivation in the martial arts, this extract from the monograph, The Virtual Ninja Manifesto: Fighting Games, Martial Arts, and Gamic Orientalism, asks whether the figure of the ‘virtual ninja’ can emerge as an aspirational figure in the 21st century, modeled on the ‘event’ of Bruce Lee. The work seeks to illustrate the argument that the kind of training required to master videogames approximates the kind of training described in Zen literature on the martial arts. It suggests that the shift from the actual dōjō to a digital dōjō represents only a change in the technological means of practice. It explores the possibility that, after Bruce Lee and Daigo Umehara, martial arts games can promote spiritual development.
Everything begins with Brucie, no? I love that scene when the master tells him that his skills have now moved beyond the physical to the spiritual level.\(^1\) And I believe it too. Hong Kong movies don’t lie to us, right? So, who wouldn’t want to be Bruce Lee? But look at me … I’m no Bruce Lee and I never will be.\(^2\) And then I saw the Beast and I realised that I might be able to be Brucie after all … I might be able to become a kung fu master. And not just like Carradine pretending to do it, but actually doing it.\(^3\) Really fighting the bad guys with kicks and flips and shit. Really moving beyond to the spiritual level. Of course, then I tried Street Fighter and realised that I’ll probably never be the Beast either…

- 3ddyG0rd0, Paris, France. 18 May 2013

To be clear, then, there should be no pretence that MAVs are simulations of the martial arts, nor thence that mastery of the simulation is closely related to mastering the simulated. MAVs are not training aids for kung fu students. Rather, I’m interested in exploring the extent to which MAVs are a form of simulacrum in the postmodern sense – they are martial arts in their own right, standing for nothing other than themselves. Indeed, the long-running Virtual Ninja Project, from which this article is drawn, seems to reveal that there is something about the meaning and nature of the idea of ‘mastery’ itself that can be shared across these disciplinary accomplishments, uniting them into some form of family resemblance.\(^5\) Mastery appears to emerge as a special quality of ethical self-transformation that results from skilful practices that are properly intentioned, rigorously disciplined, and martially oriented.

This article seeks to explore the meaning and potential of a single Street Fighter episode – the legendary ‘Beast Event’ – as an exemplar of the overall approach adopted by the Virtual Ninja Project. Hence, this article stands on its own as an intervention, demonstrating the arguments developed by that project. In short, I suggest that this remarkable event represents a moment of transformation in the discourse and practice of both the martial arts and of videogames. Vitaly, in the context of this special issue of Martial Arts Studies, this transformation emerges as an important aspect of the legacy of Bruce Lee.

Far from emerging from a cloudless sky, the ‘Beast Event’ of 2004 captured a cluster of cultural trajectories that included the martial arts boom, the digital revolution, New Wave science fiction and cyberpunk, and techno-Orientalism.\(^6\) The role of Japan as an emblem of technoculture as well as the symbolic inheritor of the so-called ‘bushido’ tradition is essential to this case. Associated with this is the idea of the disciplined accomplishment of intuitive mastery of a set of controls and techniques. Part of the significance of this Japan-inflected event is the way that it enables a re-representation of the (Japanese) MAV as the inheritor of the modern spirit of the martial arts in a postmodern

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1. This scene appears in Enter the Dragon (1973).
2. I didn’t press 3ddyG0rd0 on what were the specific attributes that he lacked. However, he was not of Chinese descent, he was not under 32, and he was not in optimal physical condition.
3. David Carradine became famous for playing the Shaolin monk Kwai Chang Caine in the television series Kung Fu (1972-1975). At the time, he was not a martial artist (although this show kickstarted his life-long interest in kung fu); the role was apparently designed for (and by) Bruce Lee himself. The show inspired many Americans and Europeans to take up the martial arts, largely because of the mystical climate of mastery that it associated with the arts via legends of the Shaolin monastery, and much less because of Carradine’s performance of the martial arts themselves.
4. The Evolution Championship Series (or EVO) is an annual esports event focussed exclusively on MAVs. It is usually held in California, USA. It is the largest and longest running event of its kind. It has its roots in a Street Fighter II tournament in 1996, but became EVO in 2002. The number of participants, attendees, and viewers has grown consistently each year, as has the prize money.
5. The Virtual Ninja Project began in 2010 with an international survey launched in the gaming magazine Edge. After several years of fieldwork in game arcades around the world and follow-up surveys, the conclusions were published in The Virtual Ninja Manifesto [Goto-Jones 2016], one of the launch volumes of the Martial Arts Studies book series edited by Paul Bowman [https://www.mentalpraxis.com/virtual-ninja-project.html].
6. This clustering is explored in Goto-Jones [2015, 2016].
age; the so-called ‘Japanese ideology’ is at work.7 Crucially, then, this identity seems to invoke an ideological commitment (either voluntarily or otherwise) and hence creates space for a manifesto as an intervention into the discourse; such a manifesto for gamers was a central part of the larger project.8

HOW THE DRAGON BECAME THE BEAST

As gamer 3ddyG0rd0 remarks, ‘Everything begins with Brucie, no?’7 Well, Bruce Lee is one of the most recognised names in contemporary history. It is no exaggeration to say that he changed the face of the martial arts, of the movie industry, and of Asian masculinity.7 After the worldwide release of his landmark movie Enter the Dragon (1973) and his untimely death in the same year, Lee’s legend was secure. He became an icon; his brief presence on the world stage was a transformative moment in the lives of people all over the world, and remains a powerful inspiration to this day.

Thirty years later, the world witnessed another inspirational (new) media event, featuring another emerging star from East Asia’s fighting scene. Like Lee’s breakthrough Hollywood movie, this moment was engineered at the intersection of ‘East and West’ by a (new) media event in California; a powerful moment of hybridity. Yet, despite his incredible performance, which has been viewed by more than 25 million people on YouTube and has been recognised as the most important moment in pro-gaming history, the name of Umehara Daigo has not made it into the consciousness of the general public. As ‘The Beast’, arguably the greatest fighting-gamer of his generation, Umehara remains a subcultural hero rather than a global icon.10

Of course, there are many reasons why these two moments have landed differently in transnational popular culture. However, there are some important similarities that justify their comparison. In particular, while both participate in a transnational discursive space that features the martial arts (as practice, representation, simulation, simulacrum, and fantasy), both seem to be more than simple instances of entertainment; indeed, both appear to constitute ‘events’ in Badiou’s sense.11 That is, just as the Bruce Lee ‘event’ enabled (or completed) a profound transformation in Western discourses and in Western bodies [Bowman 2011: 68], so the Umehara Daigo ‘event’ enables (or starts) a potentially profound transformation in transnational discourses and individual bodies. To make this as concrete as possible: Bruce Lee’s event changed people’s aspirations and practices regarding kung fu, inspiring millions into new behaviours, beliefs, and routines of physical discipline; Umehara Daigo’s event changed people’s aspirations and practices regarding MAVs, inspiring millions into new behaviours, beliefs, and routines of physical discipline. Bruce Lee was the reason a whole generation of people went Kung Fu Krazy; Umehara Daigo is the reason a whole generation of people have invested millions of hours and dollars in Street Fighter (and other MAVs).

Tackling this claim a step further, I would argue that the Lee and Umehara ‘events’ are not only connected through thematic association but that they are also causally related. That is, the Umehara event relies upon the Lee event; Lee is one of the conditions of possibility for Umehara. In this way, we might render these two events as markers in a sequential (or at least an episodic) cultural narrative about the significance and meaning of the martial arts in contemporary societies, culminating in a postmodern embrace of the videogame as its current exemplar.

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7 The ‘Japanese ideology’ implicates the literature/industry of the so-called ‘Nihonjinron’ (essays about Japanese uniqueness). An early yet still powerful intervention into this ideological field is Peter Dale [1986].

8 With illustrations by SIKU, The Virtual Ninja Manifesto can be viewed on the project website [https://www.mentalpraxis.com/virtual-ninja-project.html].

9 This feature of Bruce Lee’s impact is well discussed by Bowman [2010, 2011, 2013].

10 Umehara is listed in the 2011 Guinness Book of World Records (gamer’s edition) as the most consistently successful player of all time (with 15 consecutive tournament wins).

11 The salient feature of Badiou’s ‘event’ in this case is neatly elaborated by Bowman [2011: 68] when he describes it as an encounter that transforms those participating in the encounter. This makes it importantly different from a form of communication.
From the Dragon to the Beast
Chris Goto-Jones

3. seeing without knowing

a life sparks within
an awoken memory
exposed and revealed
is the ninja alien?
where is the roiling city?

The episodes illustrated in Figures 1 (right) and 2 (p.56 below) are part of an original sequence of ten (numbers three and five), which compromise the Virtual Ninja Manifesto. Each image is accompanied by verse and prose. The sequence is modelled on the Jūgyūzu (Ox-Herding Pictures), a sequence usually attributed to Kakuan Shion, a 12th century Chinese Buddhist priest. It is closely associated with the path to Enlightenment in Zen Buddhism.
THE MIRACULOUS REVERSAL PLAY

The ‘Beast Event’ (or ‘Evo Moment #37’ as it is sometimes called) refers to a 57-second gameplay sequence in the final round of the first match of the semi-final of the Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike (1999) competition at the Evolution World Championships 2004, in Pomona, California. The match was between the last surviving American player, Justin Wong, and the great Japanese hope, Umehara Daigo. Wong was playing as Chun-Li and Umehara as Ken. The dynamism of the sequence of play is difficult to describe and should really be experienced by watching it.\(^{12}\)

However, in brief, Wong had worn Umehara down to his last pixel of vitality; had Chun-Li successfully landed even one more strike, Umehara’s Ken would have collapsed. At this last possible moment, Umehara performed a stunning reversal: he parried 15 consecutive strikes and launched a powerful counter attack that won the match.\(^{13}\) The crowd went wild. NHK’s MAG-NET programme called this the ‘miraculous reversal play’ (kiseki no gyakutengeki), a phrase more commonly used to describe a sudden comeback in baseball.

Paralleling the impact on martial artists of watching Bruce Lee’s virtuosity in Enter the Dragon, watching this sequence for the first time can be a powerful and inspirational experience for gamers. The influential gaming site Kotaku has listed it as the most important pro-gaming event in history.\(^{14}\) During the Virtual Ninja Project, this event was the only pro-gaming moment to be listed as the inspiration that led people to take up gaming or to take gaming more seriously. However, for many people, watching footage of this event is entirely inexplicable and confusing; it is just a blur of cartoonic, videogame martial arts, indistinguishable from the recreational play of children (and adults) every day. People imagine frantic and arbitrary ‘button mashing’ to produce semi-random outcomes, translated into visual spectacle by a virtual site, and the immersion of players therein, on the romantic model of cyberpunk.

In order to begin to unpack the significance of the ‘Beast Event’, we might recognise two interrelated kinds of literacy within the game itself. The first is an abstract literacy regarding the protocols and control schemes of Street Fighter III. The second is the embodied literacy required to perform the techniques and movements described by the abstract literacies. In the language of game studies, we might see abstract literacy as the culmination of ‘object skills’ (including conceptual skills) and ‘social skills’, and identify embodied literacy with ‘locomotive skills’. In general, the literature of videogames studies tends to neglect the importance of locomotive skills and to privilege the categories of object and social play [Myers 2009: 46].\(^{15}\) At least prima facie, this appears to set the critique and appreciation of MAVs apart from the critique and appreciation of physical martial arts.

This question of accessibility and comprehensibility is a serious one, which is common to many specialised or highly skilled activities. It is related to the question of literacy. In this case, whilst gamers might refer to Umehara as a gēmu-kami (gaming-god), the academy has been slow to recognise the importance of Umehara’s accomplishment at least partially because the kinds of literacies required to understand the event are not typically the kinds of literacies required of scholars. Nothing textual or narrative is happening; even scholars of videogames would find this 57-second sequence extremely specialised and difficult. In some ways, the situation is not dissimilar from that around the martial arts in the 1970s and 1980s, when scholars struggled to understand how to understand the sudden and immense popularity of the martial arts and martial arts cinema.\(^{16}\) Audiences could see that Bruce Lee was doing something amazing, but most could not really understand what he was doing (and some could not believe he was really doing what it looked like).

12 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBVdk1bFddk

13 In a rather anticlimactic Grand Final, Umehara (again playing as Ken) lost to the enigmatic KO’ (playing as Yun). For some aficionados, this grand final was of superior quality to the semi-final, which was distinguished only by Umehara’s moment of brilliance. It seems to be accepted that the character ‘Yun’ is extremely difficult to master and that KO’s gameplay was extraordinarily skillful. This compares to the relative ease of playing (defensively) with Chun-Li in Street Fighter III.


16 Bowman [2011: 66], citing Bill Brown [1974], suggests that this difficulty was at least partially a result of scholarly reluctance to engage with the importance of the martial arts in an evolving race politics. It is helpful to remember that the technical skills exhibited in the martial arts are also alienating to many observers; this emphasis on embodied knowledge as an essential literacy is a factor that continues to inform and shape the field of martial arts studies today. See, for instance, Farrer & Whalen-Bridge [2011].

17 This tendency reflects an emphasis on the self-contained nature of the virtual site, and the immersion of players therein, on the romantic model of cyberpunk. The privileging of object and social play means that the study of videogaming has (so far) managed to avoid the kind of impasse that has emerged in martial arts studies, wherein forms of embodied knowledge that are generated by practice are valued as authenticating the authority of a scholarly voice. The scholar-practitioner becomes the model of the legitimate, literate inquirer. The role of experiential knowledge in research methodologies has a long and controversial history, running from debates in anthropology about the merits of participant observation through to cutting edge issues about embodied cognition and the ‘taboo of subjectivity’ [Wallace 2000]. The emerging field of martial arts studies finds itself fully engaged in these controversies.
However, in order to understand the ‘Beast Event’, it is important to realise that ‘one of the more striking characteristics of video games is the extent to which [they] depend upon and require some mastery of locomotor play prior to engagement with the game as a whole, particularly prior to engagement with game rules governing object and conceptual play’ [Myers 2009: 49]. Although the amount of physical skill required to play a videogame varies across a wide spectrum, it is clear that the ‘interfaces … are ideological’ across the whole range because (no matter how much skill they require) they always serve to mediate the complicated relationship between the player and her avatar, between the actual and the virtual worlds [Rehak 2003: 122]. That is to say, the ways that different control schemes map the behaviours of our physical bodies onto our various virtual bodies ‘produce specific experiences of embodiment’ such that ‘different types of interfaces and different gameworlds mold players’ embodied experiences’ [Gregersen & Grodal 2009: 66, 65].

In other words, the design of the play-interface and the control scheme is not only a game-play choice but also an ideological choice. The ways in which physical movements of players are mapped onto the movements of avatars have real consequences, not only for the player’s access to the gameworld and her literacy therein, but also for the kinds of embodied experiences that feedback from the gameworld into the fleshworld of biological bodies, sensations, minds, and thoughts. As I argue elsewhere [Goto-Jones 2016], the joystick is an event in itself, enabling and creating the permeability of the gameworld, transforming embodied knowledge into virtual actions and vice versa. Hence, while the movements involved may be relatively tiny and subtle – often just precise movements of fingers or thumbs – locomotor play in videogames is at least partially a form of embodied literacy akin to that required in other performative arts (puppetry, dance, martial arts, etc.).

In this regard, MAVs (such as Street Fighter III) are particularly interesting. This is because the MAV genre is unique in its ‘hardcore’ approach to the control interface itself. In general, since the release of Street Fighter II in 1991, MAVs have had very complicated control schemes that include ‘beginners’ techniques (requiring only one or two button presses, simultaneously or in sequence), which may be enough to tempt a casual player into the game or enough to win an early stage.

Any competent or ambitious player will quickly move on to learn more advanced techniques and combinations, requiring ever more complicated and precise sequencing and timing. Most MAVs include a training mode or ‘virtual dojo’ where players spend hours, days, weeks, or even months attempting to master difficult techniques before using them in the game itself [Goto-Jones 2015]. Some gamers talk about entering into ‘flow zones’, a term used by psychologists to describe heightened states of concentration, immersion, control and a loss of self-consciousness.

It’s difficult to explain. I don’t really think about what I’m doing, you know? I just sort of do it. I watch the other guy’s sword and his stance and then it’s like … phssssht, you know? Sometimes he’s dead even before he’s even finished his cut. And I’m just standing there, sword already back in its sheath. It’s awesome. I guess I’ve been practicing for so long that it just kind of happens by itself … I don’t need to think about it, and certainly not about my thumbs – if you’re worried about your thumbs it’s all already over. If anything, it’s just his sword in my mind, and as soon as it’s about to move I just kill him.

That’s it. [raiden_nut?, Colorado, USA. 13 July 2012. (Discussing Bushido Blade)].

The most important strike of no-thought is when, facing off against your opponent … your body becomes the striking body, your mind the striking mind, and a powerful strike of your hand emerges from nothing and leaves no trace.

Unlike most other game genres, in which mastering the control scheme is an instrumental achievement that enables access to and exploration of the virtual world or narrative of the game itself (i.e. learning the controls is a pre-condition for play), in MAVs mastery of the control interface is itself the goal. Whether or not the game is enwrapped in a(n often tokenistic) narrative structure, gameplay is invariably in the form of ‘stages’ or ‘matches’ between two or more avatars in direct confrontation. Winning a stage relies on spontaneous and fluent mastery of the control scheme and tactics appropriate to the particular

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18 For example, the most recent edition of the popular MAV BlazBlue (BlazBlue Chronophantasma Extend, 2015) includes a ‘Stylish Mode’ for players who ‘don’t like to practice and just want to have fun’. This mode, which contrasts with the ‘Technical Mode’ for players who wish to explore all the possible techniques and combinations, still requires a 30-minute tutorial just to explain (in abstract terms) the range of possible movements, and still requires many hours to learn to actually perform these moves. Pushing even further in this direction is the online game Rising Thunder (2015), developed by Seth Killian, which seeks to enhance accessibility and gameplay by mapping complex super moves to single button presses.

19 The foundational statement of ‘flow’ was by Csikszentmihalyi [1990]; more recent work in this field has focussed on videogames [e.g. Sweeter & Wyeth 2005].

20 The Virtual Ninja Project devoted considerable space to exploring the extent to which textual and philosophical parallels exist between the self-understandings of gamers and historical martial artists/thinkers.

21 Excellent work on the subversion of this binary form of combat as a mechanism to problematise notions of identity and immersion has been done by Hutchinson [2007].
characters on stage. Winning may also advance a player to the next narrative stage, but the main significance of victory is that another (usually more challenging) fight will take place. In short, the (narrative) development of the MAV is expressed as the progression through increasingly difficult iterations of the same challenge (a face-to-face fight), requiring ever greater and more complete mastery of the control interface until, at the moment of final victory/mastery, the game is won. Far from being an instrumental pre-condition for play, mastering the controls marks the end of the game: the journey through the game is framed as the warrior’s journey to mastery.

The prototype for this structure might well have been Bruce Lee’s unfinished (but seminal) film The Game of Death, in which Lee must defeat one opponent after the next as he ascends a pagoda towards the greatest challenge of his skill.22 A similar structure is evident in Lee’s ‘event’ masterpiece, Enter the Dragon, in which Lee enters a martial arts tournament on a private island and must fight through increasingly challenging matches before his confrontation with the ‘boss’ character at the end of the film.23 Final victory in each case is the ultimate expression of technical (and spiritual) mastery (an idea captured clearly by the subtitle of John Little’s Bruce Lee documentary, A Warrior’s Journey). The honourable ideal of direct, honest combat between two fighters (whether the opponent is another human/avatar or computer controlled) is clearly lauded in both Lee’s films and in most MAVs. This ‘staged’ and direct architectural form quickly became the standard in MAVs, with some franchises (such as Tekken, Street Fighter, and Mortal Kombat) mirroring the shape and tropes of Enter the Dragon and The Game of Death with considerable fidelity.24

22 The Game of Death was left incomplete in 1972 when Lee postponed production on it to film Enter the Dragon. Five years after his death, a small portion of the footage that Lee had shot was inserted into an original film made by Robert Clouse (the director of Enter the Dragon) that bore no resemblance to Lee’s original conception. It was not until 2000, in the John Little documentary Bruce Lee: A Warrior’s Journey, that the entirety of Lee’s original footage was presented to viewers.

23 Quite often, one stage, frequently near the end, involves a confrontation between a fighter and him/herself as the ultimate moment of self-mastery and spiritual accomplishment. Enter the Dragon points in this direction with its famous Hall of Mirrors.

24 Many franchises organise their games around a central ‘global’ martial arts tournament sponsored by an evil rich man bent on collecting and exploiting the powers of the best fighters in the world, just as in Enter the Dragon. In the latest version of Mortal Kombat (X), there is even a ‘Tower Mode’ (variations on which have long been a staple of the franchise) in which players fight their way up their own The Game of Death edifice towards the ultimate challenge.

This context helps us to unpack the cultural and ideological significance of the ‘miraculous reversal play’ of 2004 in a more meaningful and literate way, which in turn helps us to make sense of the assertion by Seth Killian [2012] about Umehara’s ‘event’ that ‘people can take the playing of games and elevate it into an art form’.

57 SECONDS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

Prima facie, this 57-second sequence simply shows Umehara’s Ken return from the brink of apparently certain death to an improbable victory over Wong’s Chun-Li. What we miss in this reduction is the extent of the improbability and thus an appreciation of the level of skill (and artistry) involved in accomplishing it. We might start by noticing that Umehara’s Ken (hereafter, UmeKen) had been reduced to the smallest possible amount of vitality – just a single pixel.25 This meant that even a single strike from Wong’s Chun-Li (hereafter, Wong-Li) would have killed him.

Vitally, in Street Fighter III, even blocking an attack causes a small amount of damage (known as ‘chipping’), which meant that UmeKen would also die if he attempted to block even a single strike (by moving away from Wong-Li as he attacked). So, UmeKen retreats to his corner to gain some space and thinking time. Meanwhile, Wong-Li is considering whether to attack or simply to let the clock run out (and thus win on points). UmeKen will lose if nothing happens, and will lose if Wong-Li makes any contact with him. Wong-Li could just stand there, do nothing, and win.

After a fraction of a second of thought, UmeKen throws two hadōken (wave-motion fists) energy-balls across the screen at Wong-Li, who parries them easily. This has two effects on Wong-Li. First, by parrying these attacks, he gains enough energy to launch a ‘Super’ attack. Second, he seems to find these half-baked attacks irritating, and they make him impatient. Meanwhile, UmeKen maintains his distance on the other side of the screen. A few seconds later, Wong-Li abandons the idea of waiting for the match to time-out and launches into his Super Combo – the deadly hōyoku sen (phoenix wing fan) technique. This technique unleashes a tirade of fifteen sequential strikes against UmeKen in rapid succession: in less than four seconds Chun-Li performs seven kicks with

25 Naming conventions for gamers are made more complicated by regional variations in naming. For instance, Umehara is known as Ume in Japan (a contraction of his family name) and as Daigo in the West. The practice of contracting a player’s name and synthesizing it with her avatar to produce a unique tag emerges from the arcade scene. Significantly, these tags express different kinds of agents, personalities, and unities: UmeKen (Umehara playing with Ken) is substantively different than UmeRyu (Umehara playing as Ryu), etc.
5. taming the unruly

the screen burns your eyes
as your fingers crack and click
not for a moment
can you give quarter or rest

Image credit: Concept and text by Chris Goto-Jones, art by Siku.
one leg, seven with the other, and then a powerful high-kick to end. If any one of those touch UmeKen (or if he blocks any of them) he will die.

Remarkably, UmeKen keeps cool. Indeed, in hindsight it is clear that he had launched his hadōken precisely to enable (and actually to goad) Wong-Li to make this devastating attack. UmeKen was maintaining a critical distance from Wong-Li that enabled him to time his response perfectly. Despite being in a horribly weak situation, UmeKen now had the advantage of knowing what his opponent was about to do (and knowing that he had been lured into doing it unnecessarily). He was playing Wong-Li’s mind as well as his body. Killian remarks that Umehara provoked a ‘mental break’ in Wong-Li.

Nonetheless, UmeKen still had to deal with a relentless Super Combo barrage. In Street Fighter III, there is a delicate and precise technique known as the ‘parry’. Unlike the ‘block’ (which is relatively easily accomplished by holding your direction away from an attacker), the ‘parry’ does not suffer from ‘chipping’. To accomplish a parry, a player must move towards each individual strike at the very instant that it is performed. Completing a ‘full parry’ against Wong-Li’s hōyoku sen would require UmeKen to complete fifteen separate instantaneous parries within four seconds (in front of a massive live audience in the semi-final of the most important tournament of the year). If he mistimed even one of them, the attack would kill him.

To the great excitement of the crowd, UmeKen successfully performs this miraculous ‘full parry’ – it is the first time anyone has ever done this in a tournament, and the first time most people found out it was even possible to do it.26 In hindsight, we can see that UmeKen’s control of distance (maai) and his opponent’s mental state had set up the conditions for this possibility. More than that, however, Umehara had trained long and hard in the performance of the parry, repeating it and repeating it until the movements and the timing were hardwired into his muscle memory: he did not have to think about the performance or enact the techniques consciously. As Killian notes, ‘the thing with parrying that Super is that it’s so fast you have to be parrying at the time the Super flashes, you can’t react to it … You can’t see the flash and start tapping the parry out. You have to be parrying the instant the Super is initiated’ [Killian 2012].

But this is not even the end: completing this astonishing ‘full parry’ is only half of the ‘miraculous reversal play’. Knowing that the full parry would simply leave him standing next to Wong-Li with still only one pixel of vitality left, immediately vulnerable to even the simplest strike (and thus in no better situation than before his incredible performance – indeed, in a worse situation because there is less time left on the clock), UmeKen decides to improvise and make the last parry while jumping in mid-air, despite the ridiculous difficulty of doing this. This apparently unnecessarily flamboyant and dangerous move has a secret genius: knowing that his full parry will have gained him enough on his Super meter to execute a Super counter attack of his own, UmeKen seeks to combo his Super from a jumping kick as he descends from the last parry, thus minimizing the window of opportunity for Wong-Li to respond (if he were even able to respond after the shock of the full parry). As a result, the kick hits Wong-Li squarely and UmeKen follows it immediately with a Super Combo that knocks Wong-Li out of the match with its last strike. Thus, the miraculous reversal play is attained.

The various YouTube videos of this event (and the thousands of comments posted around them) show the crowd going crazy at this amazing accomplishment – it is Muhammad Ali dropping George Foreman in the eighth round of their historic 1974 ‘Rumble in the Jungle’. But, more Lee than Ali, Umehara retains his characteristic calm; when asked about how he managed this incredible feat, Umehara gives the kind of response that might be expected from Lee: ‘I train all the time, so this kind of thing happens. It’s just one of my normal techniques, really’.

In fact, Umehara is famed for being cool under pressure. His playing style is noted for its crisp, controlled precision, while he sits in apparent tranquillity at the controls. For some, one of the stand-out moments of the ‘Beast Event’ is the way that he appears to get angry and frustrated at the start of the 57-second sequence – the live commentator remarks on this in surprise. Umehara later explained that he had become frustrated with Wong-Li’s ‘turtling’ (conservative, defensive tactics). But then he regained his cool and pulled off the miraculous reversal. The association between Umehara’s personal tranquillity and his technical prowess is such a strong element of the discourse that the ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ franchise produced a T-shirt and poster of this event: ‘Keep Calm and Parry On’.27

This juxtaposition between Umehara’s cool and Ken’s explosive dynamism renders the existential force of UmeKen and the cultural force of the ‘Beast Event’ into powerful experiences for literate audiences (who understand the intimate, embodied relationship between Umehara and Ken). In particular, it is interesting to note

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26 In subsequent releases of Street Fighter, this aspirational technique was added to the training regimes in the practice mode.

27 This phrase is now a common catchphrase in gaming and has been associated with various games and some sports, such as fencing.
the way that this event participates in the ‘reiterated rhythmic cycle’ observed by Paul Bowman as encapsulating the ‘fundamentals of the event of Bruce Lee’ [Bowman 2011: 68]. For Bowman, it was Lee’s consistent pairing of ‘superlative physical violence’ and ‘supreme calm’ in Enter the Dragon that affected a transformation in the discourse of the martial arts worldwide, forever tying superior physical technique to moral and spiritual accomplishment: ‘Repeatedly, Bruce Lee fights, wins, stops; is utterly calm. He bests hordes of opponents; then sits down in the lotus position’ [Bowman 2011: 67-68]. In the case of UmeKen, the rhythm is transformed into simultaneity: Ken explodes with ‘superlative physical violence’ while Umehara sits in ‘supreme calm’. The temporal unification of UmeKen in this way provokes fascinating existential questions.

Like Umehara, Lee’s skills are represented as being the result of constant physical conditioning until techniques become ‘normal’ or natural or automatic. Following his ritual triumph early in Enter the Dragon, Lee’s character explains to a senior Buddhist monk that remaining calm and relaxed in a fight is vital because it allows his body to act by itself: ‘A good martial artist does not become tense, but ready. Not thinking, yet not dreaming: ready for whatever may come. When the opponent expands, I contract; when he contracts, I expand; and when there is an opportunity, I do not hit: It hits all by itself’. For the monk, this insight reveals that Lee’s skills ‘have gone beyond the mere physical level … to the point of spiritual insight’. While the content of this ‘spiritual insight’ remains rather opaque, the Bruce Lee event (as an intervention into the discourse of the martial arts in transnational popular culture) succeeds in associating the sublimation of physical techniques of violence through rigorous training with transcendental goals and virtue; and it succeeds in making this an aspirational model. The Beast event participates in this discourse in a new technological mode, demonstrating and actually embodying this union of physical and spiritual insight through the simultaneity of violence and calm in UmeKen.

From the Dragon to the Beast
Chris Goto-Jones

The Beast, but my boyfriend tells me that he sometimes wants to poke me to make sure I’m still breathing. It’s the zone, right? It’s focus. My body sort of shuts down everything it doesn’t need. I sit really still with only my hands still working the buttons. He says I don’t even blink. And then, in an instant, the other guy’s dead, right. I just finish him without even blinking. The first thing I notice is the rush of victory.

[HaRun05akura, San Francisco, USA. 25 February 2015].

My wife just laughs at me because I look so tense. She says I freeze up and my eyebrows twitch as I concentrate, and then I sort of spasm - my fingers go and my hands twist and I jerk to the side all at once. But to me this feels like perfect inner calm and then flawless technique. That guy's dead in one cut! That's what I see. That's why I come back for more.

[hanz0_24, Hong Kong. 6 April 2012].

Outwardly for the observer, the right shot is distinguished by the cushioning of the right hand as it is jerked back, so that no tremor runs through the body ... But inwardly for the archer himself, right shots have the effect of making him feel that the day has just begun.

[Herrigel 1953: 75 (Discussing Zen and the Art of Archery)].

28 In many ways, this Lee ‘event’ is a performance of an existing and pervasive theme from the more specialised martial arts discourse of practitioners, transposing it into a superstar event for a global audience. Stephen Chan has observed that certain Japanese martial arts (especially those performed in solo forms) exhibit a cyclical rhythm of stillness and action undergirded by the idea of meditation: ‘One meditates while being still; out of this meditation a single, short series of actions arises; the actions resove themselves in stillness once more; this is visible to the onlooker; the practitioner is of the same meditating mind throughout. Being still, or in action, his (and today, also her) mind is clear as water, and is uncontaminated by conscious or rational thought’ [Chan 2000: 72].

29 Herrigel’s account has been convincingly (albeit controversially) discredited as overly romantic and naive and as participating in the invention of the modern bushido myths in the West [Yamada 2001, 2009].
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This article argues that creativity in martial arts can be linked to moments of crisis. It does so on the basis of a comparative analysis of Bruce Lee’s martial artistry – specifically, his creation of jeet kune do – in relation to the earlier development of bartitsu and the more recent example of xilam. All three of these arts were founded by experienced practitioners who took personal and social crises as stimulus for creativity. Lee’s own crises can be understood as: (i) Separation, in terms of his geographical distance from his wing chun kung fu school; (ii) Fitness, in terms of his dissatisfaction with his physical condition following a now (in)famous duel; and (iii) Injury, in terms of the injury he suffered to his lower back in 1971, which resulted in chronic back pain for the remainder of his life but which also allowed for the technical, supplementary and philosophical basis for his personal way towards combative excellence and overall human development. On the basis of comparing these three cases, I propose a theory of martial creation, which I invite other martial arts studies scholars to test and explore further.
THEORISING BRUCE LEE

There are numerous ways of theorising and philosophising Bruce Lee as a person, cultural icon and household name. Some include using poststructuralist frameworks derived from thinkers like Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida [see Bowman 2010, 2013, 2017a]. Others derive from studies of masculinity [see Chan 2000]. One might also draw from a range of social theories, such as those of Pierre Bourdieu which inspired the Fighting Scholars collection [Sánchez García and Spencer 2013]. Other approaches are available, relating to the phenomenology of the body (and senses) using the likes of Maurice Merleau-Ponty [see Spencer 2012] or historically-sensitive work developed from Norbert Elias [see Ryan 2017]. Furthermore, classical social theory and other forms of philosophy could also be used to understand him as a writer and thinker of the martial arts, whether in terms of class, ritual, or charisma, using Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim or Max Weber, and so on [see Law 2010].

It is important to acknowledge that all of these theoretical avenues provide powerful and specialised lenses with which to view any subject in terms of society, power and knowledge. This is why they have been applied extensively in fields such as the sociology of sport, as evidenced by numerous textbooks centring on such approaches [cf. Guillianotti 2004; Jarvie 2006]. Studies using such approaches could make important contributions to the surprisingly sparse academic literature on Bruce Lee, his art and his legacy. However, in this article, my aim is somewhat different. It is not merely to test and apply well-known social, political and cultural theories to the fighting arts, but rather to try to develop a new theory from them.

There are, for example, theories of physical culture that have developed from and for the study of sport and physical activity, such as Henning Eichberg’s [1998] body cultures (which I have tried to apply directly to martial arts [Jennings 2018a]). And martial arts studies, as a field in its own right, should not hesitate to develop its own theories that can combine and contrast with pre-existing scholarship, such as that which is used in sport, physical culture, leisure studies, history, and political science, among a host of cognate disciplines and fields of inquiry. This theory can be gradually developed as Grounded Theory [Glaser and Strauss 2017], building and testing theory with numerous examples, and responding to suggestions and critiques from peers and critical interlocutors.

As an example of such a theoretical endeavour, this article aims to explore the legacy of Bruce Lee as a martial artist, and, in particular, as a creator, founder, and pioneer of his own martial art, jeet kune do, in 1960s California. My effort is a response to recent calls for theory (as opposed to stringent definitions and taxonomies) in martial arts studies in this very journal [Bowman 2017b]. Consequently, I shall examine the circumstances that stimulated the vision, creation and continued shaping of this art from its embryonic form as Jun Fan gung fu in Seattle (a term that merely means ‘Jun Fan’s’ [i.e. Bruce Lee’s] Kung Fu Club’) through to the art of jeet kune do that Lee left to his final students before his untimely death.

I take Lee as the principal case study, but my discussion is supplemented and supported by that of two other founders of 20th century martial arts. First, the Victorian-Edwardian British engineer Edward W. Barton-Wright, who created the hybrid self-defence art and physical culture of bartitsu in London between 1898 and 1902. Second, the Mexican martial artist Mariséla Ugalde, who developed the paradoxically or anachronistically ‘pre-Hispanic’ philosophical martial art of xilam in the 1990s, and who still leads the development of the art from its base in the State of Mexico and Mexico City today.

Using this comparative approach, I draw out similar features and other links between the personal and the social, as well as the habitus, and the forms of crisis and creativity that helped and perhaps even forced such practitioners to find their own fighting systems. This constitutes the ground of a new theory of creation and creativity in martial arts. Like almost all theories (and martial arts for that matter), it is inspired by some pre-existing frameworks. So here, I have consciously drawn from The Sociological Imagination [Mills 1959] and writings on pragmatism, such as those seen in Changing Bodies; Habit, Crisis and Creativity [Shilling 2008]. Before moving on to the chief case study and supportive exemplars that help to build and test my theory, I will explain these sociological and philosophical influences and why they have been incorporated.

Pragmatism seems relevant in relation to jeet kune do because jeet kune do purports to value pragmatism over all else. Put simply, it is a hybrid fighting system based on combat efficiency and street survival, as well as specific technical concepts such as broken rhythm. It is practical and arguably pragmatic, even if Lee is not widely considered a pragmatic philosopher. Nonetheless, since Lee’s death in 1973, there have been many developments and applications of jeet kune do, in all manner of surprising contexts. For instance, Lee Seng Khoo and Vasco Senna-Fernandes [2014] have actually called for the application of the jeet kune do combat philosophy to the somewhat unexpected realm of plastic and reconstructive surgery. They state: ‘Bruce Lee disposed [of] ideals within a style adopting a flexible approach to seek what works’

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1 For more on the concept of broken rhythm, see Colin McGuire’s contribution to this special issue.
But, in contemporary Western philosophical contexts, some emerging scholars are starting to perceive Bruce Lee as a pragmatic philosopher. For instance, A.D. Miller writes: ‘Lee’s Jeet Kune Do method of martial arts development represents both his philosophical and martial arts concerns regarding how we can understand reality through functional success within an environment’ [2015: 7]. And in this very issue, Kyle Barrowman demonstrates the probative value of understanding Lee’s combative philosophy as aligned with something akin to a pragmatic ethos.

Elsewhere, in the People’s Republic of China, wushu scholars are also starting to examine Bruce Lee, seeing Jeet Kune Do as something to learn from in the modern Chinese martial arts, specifically as a model for sports development [Li and Ren 2010; Hao, Zhang and Luo 2011; Huizin 2011]. For Li [2010], the course of Jeet Kune Do can be understood in four stages: (i) The Chinese and Western cultural environments; (ii) The influence of Chinese and Western philosophies; (iii) The social background of the time; and (iv) Bruce Lee’s own knowledge. Others, such as Li and Wang [2010] in the same special edition on Jeet Kune Do, contend that the art actually needs to keep updated with the perspective of sports development in terms of ‘body fitness’, ‘body defence’ and ‘body essence’. (Some of these ideas are relevant to this article on how Jeet Kune Do developed, although we in an increasingly global martial arts studies might benefit from bilingual Mandarin and English discussions in order to develop a more global perspective).

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF AN INTERDISCIPLINARY THEORY

Theories come in and out of fashion, and, as mentioned, they are rarely totally ‘new’. Instead, theories tend to be built upon pre-existing theoretical frameworks and concepts. New theories are sometimes created to update old ones, while others combine two or more approaches, often from different disciplines. I have selected two simple yet profound frameworks that I believe can combine to form a new theory of creation for martial arts studies.

One theory, the sociological imagination, deals with social themes and is critical of economic, financial and political themes that can relate to martial arts practice, teaching and development. The other approach, pragmatism, is more concerned with physicality, with direct experience and creativity surrounding regular life and the crises that can emerge from it. Taken together, these provide a powerful framework for understanding how and why a person might create a new martial arts system, while considering that these systems are never totally new (just like theory), but make use of previously existing martial arts styles, principles, techniques and methods.

Personal Troubles and Social Issues

Following the traditions of interpretivist sociology, one can turn to the lives of individuals to study society. Personal problems are never purely an issue faced by individuals, as they are driven by social forces and long-term processes. Likewise, social issues always lead to personal experience and potential troubles. This is the simple premise that American sociologist C. Wright Mills [1959] devised in his widely celebrated text The Sociological Imagination.

For Mills, the sociological imagination is the ability to perceive personal problems (such as poverty, unemployment, disability) as more than the problems of an individual’s life, biography and physicality, but something socially constructed and reproduced by cultural, economic, social and political spheres of life in general. An interpretivist sociologist inspired by the earlier efforts of Weber (one of the founders of sociology), Mills was interested in the meanings behind people’s lives and their in-depth experiences. In this seminal text, Mills calls for a detailed biographical and historical exploration of people’s lives and the consideration of rich case studies of individuals. He asked how they were shaped by the history of their time and what we can learn about society from their actions. In terms of martial arts, such individuals qua rich case studies would include the pioneers of new approaches to martial arts. For the purpose of understanding the founders of martial arts like Bruce Lee in a sociological way, Mills’ framework offers a perspective that situates the individual in terms of their social environment, and vice versa, with neither one in isolation.

We know enough of the events in Bruce Lee’s life (from a range of more or less reliable biographical sources) to infer much of what drove him to form Jeet Kune Do. Any number of unique or contextually predictable things about his origin, ethnicity, social class, family, upbringing, life and times can either be approached in sociological terms (such as class, gender, ethnicity or more contemporary academic concerns, including postcolonialism, sexuality and the body/embodiment), or in terms of his individual psychology or unique biography, or indeed, as I am suggesting, via combinations of the above.

In any approach, it seems important to bear in mind the often documented claim that Lee’s teacher, Grandmaster Ip Man, received complaints from Lee’s classmates about teaching someone (viz. Lee) of mixed ethnicity; and also that when he left Hong Kong for the US, Lee was not formally qualified to teach the art of Wing Chun, still never...
having learned the second part of the dummy form or the formal weapons styles of the system [Thomas 1996].

When he moved to the US, Lee did teach his early students wing chun kung fu, as seen in Lee’s student James Lee’s [1972] book, which contains a foreword from his sifu. But for both biographical and sociological reasons, in retrospect it is unlikely that Lee would have remained satisfied teaching only wing chun. Personal biography, character, creativity, restlessness and social context all seem to intervene, and help to explain the formation of jeet kune do.

From the ages of 18 to 30, Lee lived in more liberal parts of the US during a period of great social movements, such as the hippy movement that spread from California, and specifically San Francisco, Lee’s birthplace. As Daniele Bolelli [2003] pointed out, it is difficult to imagine Lee creating jeet kune do in 1950s Texas. Lee openly taught men and women of different ethnic backgrounds, and he later had access to celebrity and Hollywood students who Lee interested in a practical form of self-defence as well as a longstanding interest in Eastern philosophy. Lee’s only published book, Chinese Gung Fu: Philosophical Art of Self-Defence [1963], promoted Jun Fan gung fu as being steeped in Daoist wisdom, and his later article in Black Belt, ‘Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate’ [Lee 1971], continued such prose. His private schooling, eventual strong grasp of the English language and his university education (including a mixture of drama and philosophy) enhanced his already charismatic persona. This ability to use the voice, gestures and other bodily aspects of the person lead me to the next element of the theory: pragmatism.

Pragmatism and the Body

The sociology of the body is an established area of social science that often considers social theory in terms of the embodied nature of human life. From the early efforts of Brian S. Turner [1984], much of this makes use of philosophers such as Foucault and Merleau-Ponty, along with sociologists from other traditions. Recently, as a fresh revelation from his earlier work following this convention [Shilling 2012], the noted sociologist of the body Chris Shilling [2008] has called for renewed interest in and application of the American pragmatist tradition that was developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries along with the concept of body pedagogics [Shilling 2017].

Pragmatism, as the name suggests, is concerned with the everyday lives and struggles of human beings and how they overcome problems through ingenuity and creative endeavours. Its chief thinkers include Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and, most importantly for Shilling, John Dewey, who Shilling has cited and promoted above all others. In Changing Bodies, Shilling outlines his theory of how humans can change according to their social and physical environments. He uses various case studies, including tajiquan, to show the ingenuity of human beings in overcoming obstacles (whether physical, symbolic or imaginary). However, humans first develop certain habits over years of regular practice. Then, with certain political, social and personal circumstances, a moment of crisis can arise. This might be losing a job, imprisonment for political reasons, or an injury through the very practice that was shaping the body. People can continue to dwell in this crisis, find creative ways in which to live with it, or overcome it. This leads to the third stage of creativity – a stage connected with the theory of creation.

Using Lee as our central example, we can see the clear development of habits: ways of moving through footwork, holding the guard, striking, blocking and parrying, etc. These were grounded in wing chun kung fu, but with the distance from his teacher caused by moving from Hong Kong to the US, along with his education, Lee would meet and train with other martial artists and read voraciously about diverse arts, such as boxing and fencing. (Writers and instructors such as Teri Tom [2010] claim that Lee’s investment in boxing and fencing principles while in the US means that jeet kune do should essentially be regarded as a Western martial art based around one concept, the straight lead [Tom 2012].)

In terms of any interest in maintaining fidelity to the wing chun tradition he was part of, Lee had the practical problem of distance and time: he could not visit Ip Man on a regular basis in order to ‘complete’ the wing chun system, and there was no technology with which to learn at a distance. He did, however, have the gifts of speed, an athletic physique and a creative imagination to overcome these barriers.

In this regard, it seems that the legendary/mythic fight with Wong Jack Man in 1965 played a decisive role, forcing Lee to revise everything and turn Jun Fan gung fu, which was based almost exclusively on the Chinese martial arts, into a hybrid martial art that involved modern methods of sparing and supplementary fitness regimes. As is well-known, Lee reportedly won the fight but not in the manner or with the ease that he had expected. Exhausted after the encounter, Lee started to modify his practices, which generated a revised art and arguably also a renewed body, producing an aerobically fit physicality fortified by a new strength and conditioning regimen, a strict diet and daily stretching [Little 1997].

For more on Lee’s fight with Wong Jack Man beyond the scope of this essay, see Bowman [2017a] and Polly [2018].
Shilling [2008] has avoided using the word habitus, a concept central to the theories of Bourdieu and Elias. Habit works well with a phenomenological understanding of Merleau-Ponty or techniques of the body of Mauss. Yet habitus – a link between the personal and the social – is a key concept in martial arts studies, as has been explored in many studies in physical culture, such as the aforementioned Fighting Scholars collection and recent studies of capoeira [see Delamont, Stephens & Campos 2017]. Morgan, Brown and Aldous [2017] have explored the possibility of uniting Bourdieu with Shilling’s approach to pragmatism from a similar vantage point. With these arguments in mind, I use the term habit(u)s to focus on the socially constructed and individually embodied sets of habits that are open to change through pedagogy. This and other key components of the theory are examined below.

THE THEORY OF MARTIAL CREATION

I have now outlined the two main points of reference for the theory of martial creation. One theory [from Mills 1959] shows how the personal and the social are inseparable, and therefore interconnected. The other [from Shilling 2008] demonstrates a process of change from regular habits to a potential crisis (when the personal and social connections change or rupture) and the eventual or possible creativity which can in turn feed into renewed and revised habits. This can be mapped as in Figure 1 below.

The diagram shows the potential flow from habit(u)s to changing circumstances. The right circle, the social, includes economic forces, financial situations, political scenarios and sociocultural themes. The left, the personal, shows the mind-body-emotion nexus that is the human being, the ‘inner you’ that merges with the social to form the habitus. Habits are taught, learned, and refined in social settings, and are passed on from generation to generation. In martial arts, the habit is the long-term disposition towards continued practice of specific practices (such as punches or forms) that form the habitus of the art. With the variety of subjective and objective scenarios, the practitioners originally aim for exceeding pre-existing frameworks of principles, techniques (of the body) and the methods to achieve them. Techniques are repeated over the years, with training aids and alongside fellow martial artists also striving to cultivate this habitus.
To illustrate this explicitly via Bruce Lee:

1. Lee had a background in wing chun kung fu, a brief spell with hung kuen, and various experiences with judo, karate, kali and taekwondo via students, contacts and acquaintances. The base in one martial art gave him detailed experiential knowledge, while his experiences with the other martial arts provided him with a variety of techniques and methods to train. He possessed a hybrid and ever-evolving martial arts habitus.

2. Lee was also an established actor and a drama and philosophy student who could perform in public or for private audiences with pleasure. He developed fighting, teaching and demonstration skills (and tricks) through years of practice under formal tutelage along with informal training and personal research.

3. Yet, he was neither recognised as a senior figure in Ip Man’s Hong Kong school of wing chun nor as an elder in the Chinese martial arts community in the US. So, unlike his kung fu ‘brothers’, Wong Shun Leung and Chu Shong Tin, who remained in Hong Kong to complete the system, Lee left at an intermediate stage. He was thus never recognized as a top exponent of wing chun.

4. Lee experienced a physical crisis in the form of his subpar cardiovascular endurance and a second crisis years later in the form of a severe back injury. He was also faced with sociopolitical difficulties as man of mixed heritage. There were three clear stages in Lee’s personal crisis: separation, fitness and injury. The major crisis first stemmed from Lee’s separation from his wing chun school and the bodily lineage of knowledge for him to become a recognised sifu – or even ‘indoor student’ – to learn all aspects of the art from Ip Man. Ironically, Lee’s continued focus on technique over fitness was another point of crisis in realising that he did not have the stamina to fight a trained opponent. Finally, the injury through the very training that he used to remedy his physical weaknesses led to a crisis of temporary immobility.

5. Through cross training and extensive reading/research, Lee was able to create the art and philosophy that he called jeet kune do. The lack of fitness and power led him to bolster his training regimen. The injury, which continued to hamper him for the remainder of his life, allowed him time to read more extensively and actually conceptualize and articulate the philosophical foundation of jeet kune do (published posthumously as *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*).
6. Now, nearly half a century since Lee’s untimely death, there are different jeet kune do ‘schools’ or ‘camps’. And, as his original students age and pass away, the diversification of jeet kune do continues. New generations teach, write and spread the art and different, ‘new’ arts and styles emerge in diverse and imaginative ways.

These six steps may seem contingent or cumbersome. However, they can be summarized in the following declaration: A martial art is founded by a disciplined, habitual martial artist who creatively transcends personal and social crises. After all, martial arts are arts, and their practitioners are artists. Like composers and painters, they need to learn the basics of an art (ideally within an interactive pedagogy and from a reputable teacher), they should be able to harness their tools and they must achieve a status in order to create something new and create a new method of achieving it. The overall process of creativity is a potentially lifelong process, but it also comes with fleeting and intensive moments of (sometimes epiphanous) creation.

In terms of its delimitation, this theory is primarily concerned with new, reinvented, reimagined martial arts systems, not styles of the same system such as branches of wing chun kung fu (although they will follow a similar pattern).

TESTING THE THEORY OF MARTIAL CREATION

ADDITIONAL CASES

In order to justify, defend and delimit the theory, I shall now turn to two different martial arts, each selected on the basis of emerging evidence about their creation. The two martial artists and their arts that I have selected are Edward W. Barton-Wright’s bartitsu and Marisela Ugalde’s xilam. These are contrasting examples of two very different founders who, during stages of habit development as martial artists, created arts due to a combination of personal and social troubles manifesting in multiple crises.

Both cases are also the subjects of recent research projects in martial arts studies. Bartitsu is increasingly well-known in media, academia and popular culture. Xilam is not as well-known, but recent research into it has been published in this journal. On the one hand, the legacy of xilam’s founder, Marisela Ugalde, is yet to be fully realised, as she is still an active instructor and promoter of her art and maintains xilam under one singular and legally registered organisation. On the other hand, the nearly-forgotten Barton-Wright’s martial legacy is now being actively promoted by the Bartitsu Society, whose mission is preserving and extending the legacy of martial arts pioneer Edward Barton-Wright (1860-1951) (www.bartitsu.org).

The historical work of Richard Bowen and practical projects of modern bartitsu enthusiasts such as Tony Wolf are compiled in two books on the technical aspects of the art [2006, 2010]. As with jeet kune do, the art has fragmented into groups identified by the Bartitsu Society: (i) Neo-bartitsu (‘as it can be today’) that extends and develops the original experiments and resulting canon and (ii) Canonical bartitsu (‘as we know it was’). This is much like the status of jeet kune do with its two main branches: (i) jeet kune do concepts (i.e., open to revision) and (ii) jeet kune do nucleus (i.e., teaching what was taught as it was taught in the 1960s).

Edward W. Barton-Wright and Bartitsu

Bartitsu was founded by the British engineer and inventor Edward W. Barton-Wright, who coined, organised, promoted and taught the art between 1898 and 1902 in the Bartitsu School of Arms and Physical Culture in Soho, London. Like jeet kune do, the art was only formally taught under this name for several years. Its name is taken from Barton-Wright’s own surname and the Japanese art of ‘jujitsu’ (a Japanese term that today is regarded as more correctly rendered ‘jujutsu’ but that is still often spelled ‘jujitsu’).

Bartitsu (as the first available form of jujutsu in London) evidently fascinated late Victorian and Edwardian Britain. London was a centre of art, finance and science (much as California would later be) but was also a class-divided and potentially dangerous city – the most populous in the world at the time. As Godfrey [2010] notes, this was the time of the Boer War and the hooligan scares of the 1890s, which led national moral panics, social fears, and personal anxieties to be united. As a practical and exotic form of self-defence, bartitsu attracted military men, the wealthy and even women. The reason for the widespread attraction relates to the social issue of poverty. Several decades after Marx’s writings, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie were living very different material existences. This was the distinct social environment that Barton-Wright returned to after working as a railway engineer in Japan.

There is less biographic information on Barton-Wright than Bruce Lee (or Marisela Ugalde, who we will discuss next), and certainly no recorded audio or video interviews/footage; nevertheless, certain stages of his development are clear, and this helps in identifying the process of creating bartitsu. As an engineer, inventor and entrepreneur, exemplifying the heights of British ingenuity at the zenith (and feared decline) of the British Empire, Barton-Wright already had the habitus of a creative and industrious person.
He was also transcultural, having been born in India of mixed English and Scottish parentage, adding to the fact of his decade long stay in Japan, where he was one of the first Westerners to learn judo and jujutsu. It is important to note that he was not a prominent or senior judoka or jujutsuka, but certainly had a solid grasp of techniques – at least enough to impress onlookers and attract students. A film by the Bartitsu Society [2008] claims that Barton-Wright was the first Westerner to teach the Japanese martial arts and the first person to pioneer intercultural martial arts cross training and promote competitions between Japanese jujutsuka and Western wrestlers. He was also connected to the emergence of women’s self-defence in advance of the Suffragette movement (and ‘Suffrajitsu’) – with Edith Garrud and others being among his students.

At times of personal troubles and senses of personal insecurity among the mobile upper-middle class and noble gentleman (and women) of late Victorian London, bartitsu provided a model for ‘the new art of self-defence’ as advertised in various magazines featuring its founder. This new art was connected to a revamped form of chivalry and masculine vigour at a time when the ‘British’ fight ethic was tied to fears about a declining British Empire [Godfrey 2010]. In Barton-Wright’s own words, ‘the system has been carefully and scientifically planned; its principle may be summed up in a sound knowledge of balance and leverage as applied to human anatomy’ [Barton-Wright 1898]. One may see the scientific analysis of an engineer here.

There was also rampant fear of working-class muggers and gangs (often referred to as ‘ruffians’) who were regarded as to thwart mobile gentleman of the time. In an article in *Pearson’s Magazine*, Barton-Wright [1899] stressed the 300 methods of attack and counterattack against armed or unarmed opponents: ‘It is quite unnecessary to try and get your opponent into any particular position, as the system embraces every possible eventuality and your defence and counter attack must be based upon the actions of your opponent’. There is also a tone of nationalism in his writing, with particularly critical views being expressed against the supposedly ineffectual French way of kicking, the mysterious Japanese, and general disparaging perceptions of potential violence from ‘foreigners’. The non-academic website Full Contact Martial Arts has a rather academic synopsis that captures this well:

Bartitsu was geared specifically towards the problems of self-defence in an urban, industrialized society, at a time when many middle and upper class Londoners faced the threat of street gangsters. It was concomitant with a general feeling of insecurity both in England and among the traveling bourgeoisie of Europe, as well as with a public fascination with Asian (especially Japanese) culture.

Along with concerns surrounding the softening of masculinity, bartitsu included physical culture expertise and specialist ‘champions’ who taught their own specialties in fighting: Swiss ‘la canne’ stick fighting and the closely related French savate, known for its kicking techniques (as taught by Pierre Vigny); English pugilism (the details on which are less documented); and most of all, Japanese ko-ryu jujutsu, taught by two Japanese fighters (Yukio Tani and Sadakazu Uyeneshi), which was accompanied by some Swiss wrestling known as *Swingen* (taught by Armand Cherpillord). These diverse fighting systems showed the conceptual design of bartitsu for combat experienced in four ranges (distance, striking, wrestling and grappling). It was an early model of mixed martial arts (*avant la lettre*), but one geared towards street self-defence, including the use of weapons or the defence against them.

There is much more that could be said about bartitsu in relation to jeet kune do, but, for the time being, the parallels sketched above will have to suffice. Now, I will turn to another, very different, case of martial creation: The case of xilam, which was developed a quarter of a century after jeet kune do and some ninety years after bartitsu, and neither in liberal California nor imperial Britain (which were each the most powerful regions in the world at the relevant times), but rather in postcolonial Mexico.

**Marisela Ugalde and Xilam**

Xilam is a notable example of an ‘invented tradition’ [Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983]. (I have introduced it and explored key aspects of it before [Jennings 2016], as part of my emergent project using different methods and postcolonial theories [Jennings 2018b]). Xilam, which means ‘to remove the skin’ in the Mayan language, is a philosophically-rooted martial art inspired by the Mesoamerican civilisation underpinning Mexico. Significantly, it is a modern martial art developed in the early 1990s by a living and active founder. Even more significantly, it was founded by a living and active woman, Marisela Ugalde Velázquez de León, the self-proclaimed ‘mother’ of xilam, as a project based on fractured scientific philosophy and lost warrior culture [see Jennings 2015, 2016].

Like jeet kune do and bartitsu, xilam was created and spread from a large and highly influential conurbation: the metropolis of Mexico City, one of the world’s largest settlements, where social inequality and personal security are important social and personal concerns for many. Mexico City is also a centre of culture, art and fashion, and is an ideal base for someone wishing to spread a national martial art. However, unlike bartitsu and jeet kune do, xilam is more of a social and national project than a project merely or primarily concerned with individual survival and self-protection. Instead, xilam is concerned with the social
issues of a national identity crisis, discrimination against indigenous people and their languages, violence against women, an ongoing war with the drug cartels, obesity and work-related stress. Sadly, Mexico is a ‘leader’ for many global issues of violence, as well as preventable diseases, with a developing economy, meaning long hours, often low salaries and limited chances for mobility.

Against this backdrop, the art did, nonetheless, begin with an individual. Marisela Ugalde began her career in the martial arts in her teens during the build-up to the 1968 Mexico City Games. This continued with her journey through karate, kung fu and kenpo, before she became interested in the little-known indigenous wrestling style of Zhuppaporrazo. Ugalde had the skills to fight with and without weapons, to roll and to break boards and even blocks of ice (see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqMXsmOB85Y).

As accounted for in Jennings [2015], this was a story of a Mexican woman training in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, a period when females could finally train in martial arts in Mexico. Ugalde experienced personal troubles as a female martial artist of her generation and earlier abuse from her brother-in-law and divorce from a husband less sympathetic to her dedication to the martial arts. She received black belts in numerous arts, but did not focus her efforts on one particular style as a lineage holder or champion athlete.

Furthermore, despite the discrimination against women at the time, she did not pursue an overtly feminist agenda in the martial arts. Instead, from her forged habits of regular training in Asian martial arts since her teenage years, she and her second husband perceived a clear crisis in the lack of a national martial art for a nation that was renowned for its precolonial warriors. Because of this, xilam was born, later to be rendered xilam. Ugalde had extensive experience of public events thanks to an alliance with the Mexican sports chain Grupo Martí, and she remains eloquent in front of news reporters and journalists to this date – even hosting her own radio station Platicando Con Marisela Ugalde.

After the personal crisis of a split with her second husband due to an extramarital affair, Ugalde returned to Mexico City to follow the late shaman and Conchero dance leader Andrés Segura Granados, who she still regards as a spiritual mentor. She now had total creative autonomy over xilam, as her ex-husband, a Chinese-Mexican martial artist, returned to his own ethnic roots in the Chinese martial arts and his own family’s system.

From Segura’s philosophical teachings underpinned by Aztec (Nahua) metaphysics, xilam expresses creativity and Mexicanidad [Jennings 2017] via its forms, structure, terminology, designs and mantra. Like the Conchero or ‘pre-Hispanic’ dance (themselves reinvented traditions since the 1950s) and as a body culture [Eichberg 1998] it makes use of the design of the Mesoamerican calendar, indigenous language and native animals in its symbolic movements in space [Jennings 2018a]. Through its website [www.xilam.org] and other forms of social and print media, the art is promoted as a human development system as seen through its seven-staged structure claiming to enhance the aspects of consciousness, control, emotion and willpower that it says are unique to humans.

As Ugalde remains active as an instructor and promoter in her 60s, and with her daughter Mayra and other instructors following her approach, Xilam maintains its original course as a human development system and martial art inspired by Mesoamerican warriors, physical culture and philosophy. In decades to come, it will be interesting to see the potential shifts – particularly as the art seeks to internationalise following successful demonstrations and tours in China and visits from Korean political delegates. With martial arts and soft power being increasingly connected, xilam could even become one example of adoption and adaptation, as taijiquan has been elsewhere [see Mroz 2008]. This remains to be seen. But, having briefly set out the context and forces of the creation of this second comparison with jeet kune do, we may now turn to a concluding discussion of the proposed theory of martial creation.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS
TESTING AND EXTENDING THE THEORY

There are many legacies that Bruce Lee has left behind: as an actor, writer, director, and so on. As created by Lee, jeet kune do is not only a martial art but also a unique philosophy. Added to which, jeet kune do was created in a social context of US racism, Chinese ethnocentric nationalism and kinship relationships in Chinese martial arts following lineage and family. It was also created due to Lee’s (incomplete) status within wing chun, his troubles in combat (lack of endurance and power) and his debilitating back injury.

I have traced the development of jeet kune do along the lines of a theory of how and why a person might create a martial art. I offer this theory of martial creation as one of several theories that could be developed in martial arts studies. Other frameworks might include, for example, how fighting systems are taught and transmitted over time, the ways in which arts can be reinvented and reinterpreted, how they influence each other within the martial arts industry, and so on.
As part of this special issue on Bruce Lee’s martial legacies, I could have focused exclusively on Bruce Lee and jeet kune do, but felt it beneficial to expand this focus and test the theory via a comparative analysis of two other 20th century martial arts from two very different periods and places: Bartitsu in Victorian/Edwardian London and xilam in contemporary Mexico. Other historical periods could also be explored according to this theoretical paradigm, whether older or newer – study of even more recent martial arts developed in the 21st century could involve ethnographic and media as well as biographical, historical and sociological research methods.

The creation of bartitsu and xilam (and, I argue, other modern martial arts) highlight the blend between the personal and the social, as well as the three stages of habit(us), crisis and creativity. They, like jeet kune do, demonstrate that a martial art is founded by a disciplined, habitual martial artist who becomes creative during a combination of personal and social crises. A martial art is thus neither a purely individual endeavour nor a social imposition, but a unification of individual experience with historical struggles.

The theory of the sociological imagination of Mills [1959] and the revisiting of pragmatism by Shilling [2008] enabled me to formulate this argument. This was followed by a subject-specific and careful six-pronged analysis of the necessary dimensions to the development of a martial art, from the individual founder and their embodied experiences to their eventual passing away and the further development or disappearance of the art. In this way, martial arts can be seen as a form of body pedagogics [Shilling 2017] in which we can learn from our personal, physical and social environments and react in new and varied ways.

The hope underpinning this project is that other scholars might find this theory useful to explore, test, verify, qualify, modify or develop. The incorporation of other contemporary theoretical concepts might make it more robust. But the theory of martial creation already seems robust and aligned with pertinent directions of contemporary research. It certainly reminds us that human beings are relational [Crossley 2017] – always relating to issues, problems, real people, past founders, future generations and potential adversaries.

It is important to note that these foundational individuals never achieved things alone. Barton-Wright needed Vigny for his stick fighting techniques and also Japanese jujutsu practitioners. Marisela Ugalde originally formed the embryonic technical system with her second husband, a kung fu teacher. Bruce Lee worked with many other martial artists who have upheld the name of jeet kune do. Based on this dynamic social reality, two or more people might co-found a martial art together. As martial arts ethnographer Lorenzo Domaneschi [2016] reminds us, the role of materials – weapons, pads, dummies, and other technological supplements – is also important beyond that of people and their bodies. Bartitsu has its walking stick and umbrella techniques and xilam is invested in its revival of Mesoamerican weaponry. The body is still key here, of course, as it is through the body that we harness habit(us), experience crises and nurture creativity in the martial arts. But it is also other bodies, people, objects and other aspects of social life that allow or induce us to create.
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Timing is how we know when to do something in order to achieve an aim, and it is essential to all manner of human endeavour. In his posthumous international bestseller *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* [1975], Bruce Lee discussed timing as a quality of martial arts. His most influential timing concept is broken rhythm, an idea that has resonated with martial artists around the world. Notwithstanding *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*’s impact, the strategies, tactics, and methods of timing remain poorly expressed in hand combat discourse. Lee’s own choice of vocabulary was eclectic. It allowed him to discuss diverse approaches to combat time but it also led to inconsistencies that muddy the waters for those wishing to engage with Lee’s ideas. This article takes up the question of timing in two ways. First, I re-interpret Bruce Lee’s ideas about the rhythm of combat using music theory, which provides precise, self-consistent vocabulary for the task. Second, I explore the meanings that a musical hearing of hand combat reveals at the intersection of sound and movement. Based on extensive fieldwork at a Chinese-Canadian kung fu club, I identify some of the ways that percussion-driven performances of choreographed fighting skills have overlooked value as combat training.
INTRODUCTION

_Tao of Jeet Kune Do_ [Lee 1975] is a book containing the essence of Bruce Lee’s ever-evolving approach to martial arts as it stood at the time of his death in 1973. It was published posthumously in 1975 based on Lee’s draft manuscript and notes, as well as input from his widow, guidance from his senior students, and the editing of Gil Johnson. The text outlines the philosophy, qualities, tools, and strategies of jeet kune do, which was Lee’s Cantonese name for his approach to fighting. The name translates as ‘way of the intercepting fist’, and I will refer to it henceforth as JKD for convenience. The aim of Lee’s text is twofold: 1) to argue for effectiveness and efficiency in hand combat as the ultimate measure of a martial art and 2) to expound on a path of martial self-realization. The book was not intended as a how-to manual. Nonetheless, the text includes fine-grained discussion of some of the technical aspects of JKD.

_Tao of Jeet Kune Do_ provides a rich foundation for thinking about being-in-time through hand combat, which has had a transnational impact on the physical culture of martial arts, especially through Lee’s idea of broken rhythm. For example, Duke Roufus is the coach of former UFC champion Anthony Pettis, and, in interviews, he has openly acknowledged Bruce Lee’s influence on his approach to striking [see Roufus n.d.]. As an ethnomusicologist and martial artist, I am interested in the musicality of Lee’s ideas about timing, particularly the way he uses concepts like rhythm, cadence, and tempo throughout the book.

Unfortunately, there are inconsistencies and gaps in Lee’s terminology, which I aim to rectify. My first objective in this article is to listen to the core concepts of timing from JKD in order to propose a self-consistent set of musical terms for talking about the rhythm of combat. In so doing, I am purposefully flipping the idea of culture-as-text by hearing it as music, as proposed by ethnomusicologist Jeff Titon [1997/2008]. This approach rests on disciplinary conventions in ethnomusicology where music is understood at its broadest to be humanly-organized sound [Blacking 1973] and is studied in/as culture [Merriam 1964]. Given that _Tao of Jeet Kune Do_ is ostensibly about knowing oneself through martial arts, there is interpretative power in being able to think, talk, and write more clearly about how people move combatively in time. I am proposing to hear that movement first, rather than trying to read it directly.

By listening to martial arts as a form of what musicologist Christopher Small [1998] calls _musicking_, my broader aim is to clear a path to the meanings found in the embodied musical relationships of hand combat. The concept of musicking brackets ontological questions about what is or is not music, focusing instead on the human processes that organize sound in culturally-meaningful ways. As musicking, the characteristic timings that martial artists deploy in relation to an opponent can then be described, analysed, and interpreted according to individual, stylistic, and cultural ways of valuing being-in-time.

Whether perceived through the ears, eyes, or bodies, embodied rhythms of attack and defence establish relationships. Inasmuch as martial arts generate a form of humanly-organized sound, listening to hand combat musically facilitates discussion of meaning in choreomusical relationships. With regard to musical meaning, Small suggests that ‘the act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies’ [Small 1998: 13].

Violence, aggression, and struggle are key relationships when it comes to martial arts. Raw combative movements are systematized to become trained fighting skills, and they thus become part of a culturally-coded discourse on how to manage relationships of violence and aggression. Combative sounds help reveal practitioners’ relationships to opponents – physical or imagined – because they highlight how timing in combat determines the result of an encounter. When martial arts are listened to musically, embodied combative relationships can be heard, discussed, interpreted, and analysed in ways similar to the ways that people read cultural expressions as text.

A musical hearing of hand combat is predicated on listening in specialized ways. All forms of hand-to-hand combat involve timing and create distinctive sonic patterns, for which I propose the term _martial sound_ as a way of listening to the total soundscape of martial arts. Whether in training, performance, or combat, the audible aspects of martial arts include not only the sounds of attack and defence (with or without weapons), but also stepping, rolling, vocalizing, breathing, and self-accompanying (e.g., slapping one’s own body), as well as the noises of equipment, clothing, and/or flooring.

Significantly, patterns of martial sound remain audile rhythms of combat even when they are perceived visually or kinaesthetically. For example, an audience watching a fight in a large arena might not hear much of combatants’ martial sound with their ears, but they can still ‘listen’ visually to the timing. Similarly, combatants can ‘listen’ to their own movements, feeling the timing in their bodies through proprioception. They can also physically ‘hear’ an opponent’s timing, with each point of contact, pressure, and force in a striking or grappling exchange providing concrete rhythmic information.

In the second part of this article, I engage with Bruce Lee’s critique of the potentially calcifying effects of traditional martial arts training in...
that was part of Lee's foundation. As the name implies, to *intercept* is to stop, cut off, check, immobilize, interrupt, disperse, or otherwise quell an opponent's movement, which relies on sensitivity to martial sound relationships.

Timing is how one determines when to act in order to achieve an aim, and in hand combat it is in relation to an opponent. Although interception seems to imply that the opponent acts first, and that one must react to his or her timing, JKD privileges *proactivity*. This is not to say that Lee was against reactivity, because he was at pains to make clear that flexibly adapting to circumstances is central to success in combat. Ideally, however, a JKD practitioner would strategically set up opportunities for the controlled reactions of secondary attacks like interceptions or ripostes by proactively inviting, provoking, attracting, and luring an opponent to act [Lee 1975: 162–163]. Controlling the pace and rhythm of a fight provides intuition about when the opponent is going to move before they move. Lee thus emphasized the importance of trying to control the timing of an opponent’s movements in both attack and defence, allowing a JKD practitioner’s interceptions to achieve maximum effect. JKD’s overarching timing method is like a version of a saying that my wing chun teacher taught me, which he attributed to Sun Tzu, purported author of the ancient Chinese military treatise *The Art of War.* A couplet of four-character idioms sums it up as follows: ‘Act first to seize initiative; attack according to timing’ [sän faat jai yûhn; yân ēh yòh gung. 先發制人 因時而攻]. As articulated by Lee himself:

There is little direct attack in Jeet Kune Do. Practically all offensive action is indirect, coming after a feint or taking the form of counterfeiting after an opponent’s attack is foiled or spent – it requires agile manoeuvring, feinting and drawing an opponent.

[1975: 161]

### HEARING THE RHYTHM OF COMBAT

Broadly speaking, a rhythm is a pattern of duration, whether simple or complex, singular or repeated. The basic unit of duration in hand combat is what Bruce Lee called a *movement-time* [Lee 1975: 60–61], which is the interval required to make a simple motion and which...
draws conceptually on the basic temporal unit of Western fencing known as a temps d'escrime. For example, launching a punch, taking a step, or launching a punch while taking a step would each be one movement-time. Lee also used the term beat when discussing broken rhythm attacks that land on what he called the half-beat [Lee 1975: 63], but he did not clarify the precise relationship between beats and movement-time.

If I map them musically, a movement-time forms the basic pulse of hand combat and constitutes beats that can be added together or subdivided in various ways. In Western music theory, four beats are a whole note (a.k.a. semi-breve), which would accommodate a fulsome striking combination. A single beat of movement-time is thus a quarter note (a.k.a. crochet), and Lee’s half-beat would be an eighth note (a.k.a. quaver). Because a beat is perceived as occurring on the point of impact for a strike and/or the moment when weight is transferred from one foot to the other in a step, there can also be a fractional beat on preparation (known in music as a pickup or anacrusis).³

Lee’s next idea about timing was termed cadence. He defined it as ‘speed, regulated to coincide with the adversary’s’ and qualified it as ‘the specific rhythm at which a succession of movements is executed’ [Lee 1975: 63]. Used in this way, the concept is similar to the synchrony of military drill, where officers use what is called a cadence call to set the speed at which soldiers will march in time together. The term cadence is unwieldy for hand combat, however, because it conflates three phenomena: rate of movement-time, pattern of duration, and synchronization with the opponent. Furthermore, Lee used the word later in the text to refer to only one part or other of the complex of factors from his original definition. For precision’s sake, I am parsing cadence into three inter-related terms that can be used independently.

First is what musicians call tempo, from the Italian word for time. Unfortunately, Lee used the word tempo idiosyncratically, which is confusing because of the more widespread use of the word in a musical sense. He called a tempo the beat in a cadence with the ideal timing to land an attack, particularly where an opponent is committed to a movement. This definition seems to come from chess, where a player’s turn to make a move is called a tempo, although in chess one cannot make a move until the other player has finished. An opponent loses a tempo in chess when one forces them to make a move that they had not planned, as when threatening with check. In hand combat, however, one can attack and steal a tempo while the opponent is still making a move, such as with an interception like a stop-hit, immobilization, or counter-time.

Lee’s use of tempo is further complicated by the fact that he also used it to refer to timing in a musical way. In music, tempo is the underlying rate of musical pulse, which people embody when they tap their feet in time with a tune. In martial sound, a fighter’s tempo is their pace or rate of movement-time. Just as in music, combative tempo can – and often does – vary significantly. During a fight, opponents speed up and slow down as they vie to control the pace of attack and defence. Notably, a movement-time can also be shorter or longer based on the subdivision or conglomeration of beats, which does not change the fundamental tempo but does allow a great variety of rhythms. Tempo can even be a weapon, as when a well-conditioned athlete purposefully establishes a rate of movement-time that will tire out the opponent. For consistency’s sake, I recommend sticking with a musical idea of tempo.

Second are patterns of movement that create combative rhythms. While the underlying pulse of a fighter’s tempo is technically a basic type of continuous rhythm, I am referring more specifically to combinations of attacks, defences, feints, steps, and body movements that adhere together into discrete phrases. Generally speaking, fighters execute their combative rhythms according to the tempo that they are keeping. That is not to say that combinations have to be the same as the underlying beat or that there is only one rhythm for any given combination. In fact, Lee was highly critical of traditional choreographed forms because they can codify the timing of movement patterns, thus placing a limit on rhythmic options. Instead, he proposed that it is more effective for combat to use movement with a variety of rhythms in order to remain adaptable and avoid being predictable.

The third term that I parse out of Lee’s idea of cadence is synchronization and its obverse, asynchronization. In the passage I quoted above, Lee writes about regulating both one’s tempo and one’s combative rhythm to that of an opponent, i.e. synchronizing with them. Being-in-time together through a shared tempo is so basic to musicianship that musicians often take it for granted and do not need a special word for synchronous performance.

There are, however, musical terms for more complex relationships that rely on being in-time together through adhering to the same tempo.
but playing different rhythms, thus synchronizing rate of pulse while allowing rhythmic freedom. Lee’s central concept of broken rhythm is precisely about not attacking on the basic pulse of an established fighting tempo. Instead, he advocated striking between the beats in various ways so as to foil the opponent’s defences. Successful defence requires the defender to sync their movement with an incoming attack so that the block, parry, cover, evasion, sprawl, etc., occurs at the same time as the strike, throw, takedown, lock, or choke.\(^5\) Too early, and the attacker can switch to another level or line. Too late, and the attack will already have been successful before the defender has responded. Lee proposed establishing a timing pattern through a combination of feinting, moving, and stepping, and then using an asynchronous, off-beat, broken rhythm attack while the defender remains momentarily synchronized to the attacker’s old tempo and/or rhythm.

There are two primary musical examples of broken rhythm strategies, although these certainly do not exhaust the topic. By striking in time with the established tempo, but off the beat, one can use what is called *syncopation* or emphasizing the off-beats. Lee talked about broken rhythm using a half-beat or a one-and-a-half beat [Lee 1975: 63], whether with or without interjecting a pause [Lee 1975: 192]. Doing so can catch the opponent in between movements when it is not possible for them to respond.

Broken rhythm can also follow the basic pulse of the tempo but change what is called the *phase* of the synchronization. When two identical rhythmic patterns have slightly different tempos, they are out of phase with each other and thus asynchronous. Lee suggested either speeding up or slowing down at the end of an attacking combination in order to break the rhythm by changing the phase relationship of the engagement. The defender successfully synchronizes with the first part of the combo and then remains momentarily locked to the old tempo while the attacker slips out of phase to land the final attack.

Subtle acceleration or deceleration changes the phase relationship of two opponents’ timing, thus creating asynchronicity that is neither on a main beat of movement-time nor on an even subdivision of the pulse.

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\(^5\) Sometimes the best defence is a good offence, which could entail intercepting an opponent’s attack with a stop-hit or reactive takedown, thus getting ahead of the attacker’s rhythm to nullify it.
JKD, MUSIC, AND TIMING ON THE SMALL SCREEN

There is a key example in Bruce Lee’s on-screen legacy where he expounds on what I call martial sound. It is found in an episode of the television series Longstreet (1971–1972) wherein the eponymous main character, Mike Longstreet (James Franciscus), a blind insurance investigator, learns JKD from Li Tsung, an antique dealer played by Bruce Lee. Given the visual disability of the pupil, many of the lessons focus on hearing an opponent’s movement and musicking a martial relationship to it. While the screenplay is officially credited to Lee’s student, Stirling Silliphant, JKD’s creator had a hand in writing the Li Tsung scenes, resulting in him playing himself while promoting his martial art [Polly 2018: 282–286].

In the episode in question, which is appropriately titled ‘The Way of the Intercepting Fist’, Longstreet asks Li to teach him how to fight, but Li objects, saying that he does not believe in systems or methods. Instead, he claims to have found the cause of his own ignorance; so Longstreet asks for help with the same, which is when Li agrees. When they begin training together, the new student is told to listen to the beat of a diegetic jazz-funk tune as well as to listen simultaneously to his teacher’s movements.6

As the funky music plays, Li alternates between loosely bouncing in time with the main pulse and explosively either faking or kicking. Listening to the soundtrack reveals that his attacks are primarily syncopated against the beat of the music, as heard through the grunts he attaches to them. Next, Li tells his pupil to start moving, too, coaching him not to move just for the sake of it, but rather to be in a relationship to his ‘opponent’ through the beat. As Longstreet begins to hear the martial sound, Li encourages him to flow, to open up, and to find the timing for a kick of his own. The student’s kick eventually comes on the off-beat of the third pulse in the underlying four-beat metric pattern, earning praise from his teacher.

This lesson in martial sound demonstrates a relationship between movement, patterns, and timing, showing how an attacker can listen for their opportunity to strike. Longstreet cannot see his opponent, so he must hear movement as rhythm. Appropriately, teacher Li is not overly creative in his movement, as compared to Bruce Lee’s florid displays in The Game of Death

While the combative relationship between the two men is mediated by the tune blasting on the stereo, the music merely makes the rhythm of combat easier to grasp. Li/Lee uses music to show the student/audience how an understanding of martial sound allows fighting to be musical and for musicking fighters to establish relationships of attack and defence through rhythm.7

TRADITIONAL KUNG FU FORMS AND THE RHYTHM OF COMBAT

Bruce Lee famously disparaged traditional martial arts, or at least those he encountered in Hong Kong and the Western United States during his lifetime, as a ‘classical mess’ and ‘organized despair’. Central to his critique was disdain for the practice of choreographed forms, which he found limiting when compared with the unpredictable realities of hand combat.

Lee’s assessment of set routines is now widely upheld by combat sport athletes and combatives experts alike [Bailey 2014]. In JKD, only the most effective fighting concepts and physical tools are acceptable. But that does not mean that forms have no value as combat training. Somewhat ironically, Lee’s ideas about timing provide insight into how forms training can be made more useful for learning to fight. Using an ethnographic example, I intend to show that some traditional kung fu stylists use music as martial sound in a way parallel to Lee’s lessons in Longstreet, providing an often-overlooked combat benefit by training timing through musicking.

The ethnographic part of this article rests on eight years of observant participation [Wacquant 2004] fieldwork at the Hong Luck Kung Fu Club [洪樂武館] in Toronto, Canada’s Spadina/Dundas Chinatown. Master Paul Chan [陳振文] (1932–2012) and Master Jim Chan [陳文師傅] (1929–2016) founded Hong Luck in 1961, and I had the privilege of learning from them before they passed away. Between 2008 and 2016, I was ostensibly at the club to study the percussion music that practitioners play to accompany not only their lion dancing but also demonstrations of Choi Lee Fut [蔡李佛] and Do Pi [道派] kung fu.

7 It is also worth noting that an account from one of Lee’s students shows that JKD training has actually used explicitly musical methods off-screen as well [Nishioka 1998].

8 During my fieldwork, Choi Lee Fut was the main style at Hong Luck, whereas Do Pi used to be more prevalent. In the club’s early days, Hung Gar [洪家] was also taught, but now it is a peripheral part of the curriculum.

6 The musical score for this episode is credited to noted jazz composer and saxophonist Oliver Nelson (1932–1975): https://youtu.be/wuhQOAgz_Fk?t=855.

7  It is also worth noting that an account from one of Lee’s students shows that JKD training has actually used explicitly musical methods off-screen as well [Nishioka 1998].

8 During my fieldwork, Choi Lee Fut was the main style at Hong Luck, whereas Do Pi used to be more prevalent. In the club’s early days, Hung Gar [洪家] was also taught, but now it is a peripheral part of the curriculum.
A large drum is the lead instrument of the ensemble, and it is one of the last things to be learned in the curriculum. During my ethnographic apprenticeship [Downey, Dalidowicz, and Mason 2014], I thus spent a lot of time practising kung fu and lion dancing in order to work my way up to the drum. My fieldwork at Hong Luck was undergirded by 25 years of experience in a range of other martial arts as well as my training in music, which has proven helpful for thinking through the rhythm of combat.

Broadly speaking, kung fu's set routines are complex admixtures of combative, theatrical, and ritual elements [Mroz 2016], and they are central to shaping, maintaining, and expressing group identity for styles, lineages, and schools. Moreover, as an embodiment of Chinese culture, forms performance also serves as a form of soft power [Nye 1990], both enhancing China's stature abroad and (re)connecting diasporic practitioners to their heritage. When theatrical or ritual movement qualities are privileged, it tends to interfere with fighting effectiveness because dramatic exaggeration of technique might look good, but it is rarely helpful in combat.

At Hong Luck, as with many traditional styles of Southern Chinese kung fu, forms are demonstrated with percussion accompaniment, which creates an opportunity for a more combative approach to performance. Despite being one step removed from direct fighting application, musicking a fighting relationship to the drum rhythms can still make for a compelling performance – and also provide valuable combat training. As per Lee's martial sound lesson in Longstreet, being able to time one's actions in relation to an opponent's rhythm can be trained using music.

The instructors at the Hong Luck Kung Fu Club taught my classmates and I to perform solo choreographed routines without following the percussion music, thus establishing a combative relationship with the beat. As one senior student remarked to me in the summer of 2013, synchronizing movement with music makes it look like a dance, not martial arts, especially if the performer begins to emphasize aesthetics over fighting application.

However, remaining asynchronous to the loud, insistent rhythms of the drum, gong, and cymbals is actually quite difficult. There is a deeply engrained human tendency to align our bodily movements with what we perceive as music, a phenomenon known as entrainment [Clayton, Sager, and Will 2004; Phillips-Silver, Aktilis, and Bryant 2010]. A simple example is the way people unconsciously tap their feet or bob their heads to the beat of a catchy tune. Overcoming the pull of musical entrainment makes kung fu forms demonstrations more combative by demonstrating a martial relationship to the sound of the percussion ensemble. The performance becomes credible as a demonstration of martial arts through interactivity [Mroz 2016], which in the case of a solo choreographed form must be evoked through interacting with an imagined partner. In essence, the music stands in for an opponent. Remaining asynchronous to the music embodies the strategy of using elusive combat rhythms that make one's movements unpredictable for an adversary.

**RHYTHM IN COMBAT PERFORMANCE**

Within a multigenerational, multicultural kung fu club like Hong Luck, there is naturally a wide range of ability, but the different ways that people engage with rhythm during forms demonstration are also a function of their approach to martial sound. Ideally, every Hong Luck member would not only practice basic techniques and solo choreographed forms, but also engage in free sparring and lion dancing, as well as be able to play all the instruments in the percussion ensemble. In practice, however, limitations of time, interest, and ability tend to limit how many elements of the curriculum a practitioner will focus on. According to Master Jim Chan, the best forms demonstrations draw on real fighting skills to showcase realistic power, speed, and timing (in a highly performative mode), but relatively few people live up to his standards. The rare performances that embody his ideals are those with a markedly combative character, bringing knowledge and ability from sparring into a demonstration. Furthermore, an acute sensitivity to martial sound developed through lion dance and drumming is also one of the hallmarks of a good performance.

During regular training inside the club, practitioners learn and practice forms without music, meaning it is a relatively unfamiliar situation
when they demonstrate forms with music. Nonetheless, teachers typically count out loud during class to organize group training of solo forms (also for basic technique drills), which entails a certain level of synchronization. Beginners receive one verbal count for each movement, but eventually the teacher only cues the beginning of each fighting combination, allowing students to set their own pace within the phrases of movement that are strung together to make a form.

Students are encouraged to practice alone, too, in order to explore their own rhythmic interpretations of the choreography. Public demonstrations are the only time that the traditional percussion music accompanies kung fu forms, which for most Hong Luck members only occurs once a year. The club’s anniversary is celebrated annually in August, including a banquet with lion dancing and kung fu demonstrations. There are typically a few dress rehearsals leading up to the anniversary, where performers get to try doing their forms while the percussion ensemble plays. Still, performing kung fu while remaining asynchronous to the beats is an uncommon experience, contributing to a heightened sensory state during demonstrations.

In addition to nerves from being on stage in front of hundreds of people at the anniversary banquet, the thunderous percussion elicits a rush of energy that performers must learn to control, lest they be overwhelmed by it. Performance and combat are different, but the adrenaline rush of a fight-or-flight response does not discriminate between them, so being able to deliver martial arts techniques under emotional, psychological, and hormonal duress is a valuable competency to develop.

Try as they might, many people cannot overcome the pull of the beat, becoming entrained to it despite their efforts to ignore it. This problem is not restricted to new students, and some more senior members still end up entraining to the percussion during demonstrations. When I asked practitioners, junior and senior, what they were experiencing in performances where they became entrained, they often said that they were not really aware of the percussion or that they were actively ignoring it. Unfortunately for them, the percussion could still exert an influence on their bodily movements, showing that one does not need to be conscious of rhythm to be subject to its power. In hand combat, JKD timing concepts are predicated on calculating, regulating, and directing an opponent’s rhythm before applying a broken rhythm attack or counter. In order to break a rhythm, one needs to be able to find, make, and/or control a rhythm first. The ability to resist an opponent’s entrainment is thus an important defensive competence, and a good kung fu demonstration with music cultivates that ability.

Some Hong Luck practitioners develop more refined rhythmic sensibilities in their forms. During my fieldwork, the most notable example was a senior student named David Lieu [Láuh Gā-wáih, 柳嘉偉], who was my lion dance teacher, the top drummer at the club, and a regular participant in the sparring class. Before his death in 2016, Master Jim also confirmed that my own demonstrations were achieving the mark, even going as far as telling me that my kung fu was becoming the same as his teacher’s. In discussion with David, we agreed that the percussion was part of our awareness during performances, as compared to those who said that they were ignoring it. In my experience, the key is to keep the music on the horizon of my perception, but to focus on maintaining my own tempo and rhythms in the foreground.

David and I are better able to avoid entrainment because we can split our attention to encompass the percussion, granting it enough space in the periphery of perception to avoid it subconsciously entraining us and also allowing us to interact with the beats in the flow of performance. The resulting martial sound relationships phase and syncopate rather than synchronize, creating a rhythmic counterpoint that looks (and feels) more like fighting than dancing. It is in this loosely coupled choreomusical relationship that broken rhythm thrives and the boundaries between performance and combat training blur.

Hong Luck’s mandate is to preserve and promote Chinese culture in diaspora, as well as teach fighting skills for self-defence, and these two goals are mutually reinforcing for practitioners who engage with the club’s full curriculum. It would be antithetical to that mission to take a JKD approach and jettison the less combative practices, but it would be just as bad to let performance practice outshine fighting skill. When I asked the club’s sparring coach, Adrian Balca, about the value of forms, lion dancing, and percussion for combat training, he suggested that it is a question of focus [personal communication, 3 Dec. 2012]. In his experience, practitioners can develop their sense of timing, rhythm, synchronization, tempo, etc. by training in dance, music, and performance, but they still need to work at applying those competences in free sparring. Adrian has participated in all aspects of Hong Luck’s practices, and he claims to continue benefiting from that training, even though he now chooses to focus on fighting applications. As a Canadian national Chinese kickboxing [sáándá, 散打] gold medalist, Adrian has demonstrated practical abilities that support his insights. An approach like his reinvests the value of the club’s culturally-oriented performance practice to draw dividends for sparring.
Timing in Bruce Lee’s Writings

Colin P. McGuire

BROKEN RHYTHM WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

Timing in martial arts is not only a matter of combat effectiveness, because it also embodies culture. As something of an iconoclast, Bruce Lee sought to liberate himself from tradition, stripping JKD down to the ‘suchness’ of combat. Nonetheless, perspective plays an important role in how martial timing is interpreted. Case in point, Hong Luck’s Master Paul Chan taught me that broken rhythm is an integral part of performing kung fu in not only a combative way, but also a culturally acceptable one. In the winter of 2009, he took me aside during a training session to scold me for not doing my forms in a manner that looked Chinese to him, saying that I was strong but rigid and that, despite my European-Canadian heritage, my movement looked Japanese. Master Paul then gave me tips on how to finish my combinations with more rhythmnic nuance, although it was several years before I was able to apply the lesson. By 2014, I was employing broken rhythm more consistently in my forms, but by then Master Paul had passed away. Nonetheless, one of Master Paul’s closest students (who is now the club’s head instructor) intersubjectively confirmed my self-evaluation when he commented that the way I was finishing my combinations was looking Chinese.

I had gradually come to hear how there was meant to be a fluid breaking of rhythm at the end of a sequence, lingering mid-strike before gathering force and accelerating into the final impact. The resulting broken rhythm is relative to the tempo established by the initial movements of the sequence, meaning it does not need musical accompaniment to be apparent. The choreomusical relationship can take several forms: a micro-change of tempo that shifts the phase of the last beat, a slightly longer hesitation onto an off-beat that creates syncopation, or even a return to tempo for an emphatic on-beat shot that is surprising because of the contraction and expansion of movement-time that precedes it. Within a rehearsed pattern of movement, broken rhythm creates opportunities to adapt one’s striking at the last second, which creates aesthetically-pleasing variation in performance and promotes combatively effective ability to vary timing in an attack. While the movements of a form might be pre-determined, their timing is not.

The spatiotemporal phenomenon I am describing has cultural implications that extend beyond broken rhythm in martial arts. Dance scholar Yatin Lin [2010] has observed the same subtle gathering of force and temporal distortion driving toward an emphatic completion in choreography by Taiwan’s Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, as well as in Chinese calligraphy. When I studied calligraphy at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2012, I observed first-hand how the teacher’s brushwork used the same easing, gathering, and accelerating in order to write each part of a character and often with an exaggeration on the final stroke. Lin suggests that the quality of these gestures references an embodied cultural heritage that is apparent to sensitive audiences.

When the spatiotemporal qualities of this type of gesture are mapped onto music-accompanied martial arts or dance, the rhythmic features become more obvious relative to an audible tempo. Informed audiences are able to decipher meaning from the quality of the spatiotemporal gesture, which they understand as the embodiment of a Chinese way of being-in-space/-time [Mroz 2016]. I do not mean to imply that broken rhythm is exclusive to Chinese culture, but rather that in certain contexts and applications it is appreciated for its Chinese-ness.

CONCLUSION

Bruce Lee’s Tao of Jeet Kune Do is unequivocally devoted to achieving maximum efficiency in hand combat, with timing as a central quality of effective martial arts. In this article, I have parsed Lee’s ideas about timing to propose a musical framework for discussing the movement-time of martial arts through beats, tempo, rhythm, and synchronization – or lack thereof. JKD eschews the ‘organized despair’ of traditional choreographed forms because of how they condition pre-determined patterns. My ethnography of the Hong Luck Kung Fu club, however, shows that there are potential combative benefits for practitioners who can demonstrate choreographed forms with a flexible application of rhythm and timing relative to accompanying music. Moreover, learning lion dance and percussion in a kung fu club setting builds transferable rhythm skills that can be applied combatively [McGuire 2010].

Knowing that Bruce Lee was a cha-cha champion in Hong Kong, I cannot help but think his ideas about timing and remarkable control of rhythm have benefited from dance training, too. I am not suggesting that traditional kung fu forms, lion dancing, and percussion music will, in and of themselves, make someone a great fighter. Instead, I would like to point out that cross-training with martial sound can be helpful for improving rhythm and timing – even within the tightly-focused goals of JKD.

For a clear illustration of broken rhythm at the end of combinations in kung fu forms, see Choy Lee Fut master Wong Zen-yum (黄振欽師傅)’s: https://youtu.be/2wH643oYW0s.

13 Former UFC champion Anderson Silva, who is noted for his timing, also has a background in dance (he also happens to be a massive Bruce Lee fan [https://youtu.be/pWTRaI9m9XQ]): http://fightland.vice.com/blog/anderson-silva-on-racism-homosexuality-police-brutality-and-ballet.  

martialartsstudies.org
I am concerned to make clear that I intend the concept of martial sound as a discursive and analytical tool, and that reaping the benefits of combative musicking in performance or fighting relies on cultivated body-feel, not rational cogitation. Thinking musically about hand combat is more suited to teaching, learning, and analyzing martial arts than it is to real-time fighting application; there is little room for thinking in a fight, or, as Bruce Lee might say, ‘don’t think, feeeeeeel’. When rhythm strategies are understood, they can be used to maximize the benefits of training and to formulate tactics, but then timing needs to become a martial way of being-in-time that creates and seizes opportunities, not a process of intellection. Just as musicians learn theory but play music, martial artists must learn strategy but fight fights. Furthermore, although effective control of timing is important for all martial arts and combat sports, it is neither an unstoppable technique nor the be-all end-all of fighting. Several of my kung fu teachers have been fond of the expression ‘first is courage, second is force, third is skill’ [yat daam, yih lihk, sāam gūngfū, 一膽二力三功夫], meaning that without killer instinct and physical power, skill is less useful. Nonetheless, good timing is valuable – assuming one has the guts, speed, and strength to make it work.

There is more to be said about a musical hearing of Lee’s timing concepts, and of the rhythm of combat in general, which I hope will inspire other scholars and practitioners to join the conversation. To that end, the martial sound theory I espouse is intended to be applicable to considerations of fighting effectiveness, combative performance, and cultural coherence in any style of hand combat. Martial arts styles that feature musical accompaniment are the most obvious examples, and other scholars have taken note of the choreomusical relationships between movement and music. For example, practitioners of Brazilian capoeira emphasize synchronous relationships between opposing players through musical accompaniment, which provides a forum for displays of malícia or cunning [Downey 2005; Diaz 2017] and adept control of broken rhythm. Within a tempo and rhythmic framework set by the musicians, capoeiristas seek to deceive, subvert, and unbalance their opponents; the prettiest hit is the one that is in-time but un-defendable.

Martial arts without musical accompaniment are less obviously musicking, but no less productive of martial sound. In the future, I envision scholars working with video footage of combat sports to do more detailed analysis of martial sound timing. By adding sound effects to the fighters’ movements using film post-production techniques, one could make the rhythm of combat more audible and thus more obvious. Doing so would allow engagement with questions of the advantages or disadvantages of different timing relationships between opponents, as well as how personal, stylistic, and/or cultural modes of negotiating timing are manifested in competition. Bruce Lee’s JKD provides a conceptual starting point for such discussion, and the musical terminology I have advanced in this article offers coherent vocabulary for the task. At the risk of a finger pointing at the moon being mistaken for all the heavenly glory, I am drawing attention to being-in-time as a central organizing feature of martial arts, whether in training, in street-fighting, in a ring, in a cage, on stage, or in film.
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Timing in Bruce Lee's Writings
Colin P. McGuire
Bruce Lee has been dead for nearly half a century, but his status has not waned. He made Chinese martial arts famous all over the world. Indeed, the term ‘kung fu’ arguably became a household term largely because of Bruce Lee. He not only introduced the West to kung fu via film, but actually introduced changes and developments in the genres of kung fu movies, ultimately establishing it as a global film genre. In the process, he changed long-standing stereotypes about Asians in the Western world.

As the years have passed, the Bruce Lee phenomenon produced multiple legacies. This is why, on July 11-12, 2018, Paul Bowman and Kyle Barrowman held the conference ‘Bruce Lee’s Cultural Legacies’ in the School of Journalism, Media, and Culture at Cardiff University, UK. In attendance were more than 40 scholars from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Hungary, Ireland, Hong Kong and other countries and regions, all keen to explore and discuss Bruce Lee and his cultural legacies from a wide variety of perspectives – including film and television, advertising, sociology, philosophy, ethnology, digital technology, and more.

As Paul Bowman himself proposed in his own presentation, Bruce Lee set the terms of the first martial arts 'landscape' to become mainstream in the United States. He built a cultural bridge between the East and the West, revolutionized martial arts, and shattered the Western world’s stereotypes of the East. However, the oriental image he constructed also played to the imagination of Westerners. So, when we are talking about Bruce Lee, Bowman proposed, we are often talking not about a person, but a symbol, a multi-modal image. Everyone has his or her own Bruce Lee in their heart.

Journalist, best-selling author, and most recent biographer of Bruce Lee, Matthew Polly, was also present, giving a talk which provided behind-the-scenes insights and perspectives on the life and times of Bruce Lee. Polly was there to promote his own book, Bruce Lee: A Life (2018), the composition of which was based on extensive archival research and more than 100 in-depth interviews with Bruce Lee’s relatives, friends, training partners, colleagues, and even secret lovers. In Polly’s own presentation, he discussed how, contrary to his epic, heroic screen persona, the real life of Bruce Lee was comprised of intense passions, emotions and complex experiences, some unique and others utterly ordinary, and argued that Lee was a rather troubled human being.

However, among all the conference topics, a focus on Bruce Lee’s film and media work and legacies was most common, with most talks discussing his films and television shows and their intertextual legacies in contexts such as adverts and video games.
It is significant that, after starring in two films (The Big Boss (1971) and Fist of Fury (1972)), Lee formed his own production company and wrote, directed, and starred in his own project, The Way of the Dragon (1972). Eric Pellerin, an assistant professor at City University of New York, explored the transition period between Lee's work at Golden Harvest and his work under the banner of his own Concord Production. Pellerin discussed how the combination of Lee's starring vehicles for Golden Harvest breaking box-office records — and thereby earning Lee considerable clout — and Raymond Chow's belief in fostering artistic freedom allowed him to successfully establish himself beyond the confines of the traditional studio system, with its contract player model. Pellerin also juxtaposed the aesthetics and the choreography in Lee's films at Golden Harvest, in the films directed by Lo Wei, and Lee's own style in The Way of the Dragon, examining similarities and differences as well as their significance in understanding Lee as a filmmaker and Hong Kong as a site of film production.

Glen Mimura, an associate professor at the University of California Irvine's School of Film and Media, proposed that among all of Bruce Lee's cultural legacies, his kung fu movies have had the most profound impact. Mimura pointed out that The Way of the Dragon is one of Lee's most important films. Aside from being Lee's lone completed directorial effort, in The Way of the Dragon Lee projects a different symbol of Asian masculinity. Lee's protagonist, Tang Lung, defeats white, Western villains, from the Italian gangsters to Bob Wall and, of course, Chuck Norris, and in doing so he established a new sense of (embodied and embodiable) Asian strength. Mimura also postulated as one reason for its success in the West, despite its ostensibly unpalatable jingoism, the cultural context of 1960s West Coast America amidst the counterculture and Civil Rights movements.

From a very different film studies perspective, John Twycross, a senior lecturer in digital media production at Oxford Brookes University, used dynamics of computing to analyze Bruce Lee's martial arts movements. He talked about how it is impossible to reconstruct Bruce Lee's movements via motion capture but that digital capture could represent a leap forward, beyond such disappointing fighting video games as those put out by the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). Twycross also explained that, beyond trying to simulate Lee's movements, another difficulty is simulating his facial expressions. In pursuit of an accurate and plausible digital Bruce Lee, Twycross went through a computer application called 'Boss fighter', a program in which users can compete against a Bruce Lee 'clone' capable of reflecting Lee's unique fighting style.

While film and television shows have in a sense kept Lee alive even beyond his death, an underexplored realm in which the 'Bruce Lee Phenomenon' persists is the world of advertising. Sally Chan, senior lecturer in advertising media at the University of Leeds, explained the impact of Bruce Lee on TV commercials. She listed the top ten advertisements related to Bruce Lee: Levi's jeans (Bartle Bogle Hegarty advertising company, 1997), Lipton Brisk Iced Tea (JWT New York advertising company, 2000); Doritos (BMP DDB advertising company, 2008), Nokia N96 (JWT Beijing advertising company, 2008), Johnnie Walker (Bartle Bogle Hegarty advertising company, 2013), the Mazda 3 (Berlin Cameron United advertising company, 2014), the Skoda superb (Publicis India advertising company, 2016), the BMW M4 GTS (BBDO Intertone China advertising company, 2017), Body Armor Sport Water (Brooklyn Brothers advertising agency, 2018) and Boost (snap LDN advertising company, 2018). These advertisements all attempt to cash-in on some aspect of Bruce Lee, whether his film and television work or his martial arts philosophy.

For instance, in 2013, alcohol company Johnnie Walker joined forces with American director Joseph Kahn and produced a TV commercial called 'Game Changer'. In it, an aged Bruce Lee, speaking Mandarin, returns to the 'be water' theme he made famous. Accordingly, Chan argued advertisers can be seen as redploying images and ideas that people take most seriously about Lee, in order to sell more product. In this way, a successful advertisement is one that not only promotes products, but might also promote the cultural legacies of Bruce Lee.

From a very different perspective, Colin McGuire, a researcher in the music department at University College Cork, observed that in his Tao of Jeet Kune Do (1975) Lee emphasized the concepts of timing and rhythm in martial arts. In working through the Tao of Jeet Kune Do, McGuire sought to reinterpret Lee's conception of ‘fighting rhythm’. In addition to analyses of Lee's fight scenes, notably his fighting rhythm against Chuck Norris in The Way of the Dragon, McGuire also discussed his empirical study of a Chinese kung fu club in Canada, connecting Lee's innovations with the club's use of musical rhythm in timing in relation to martial arts demonstrations. As McGuire argued, it is highly beneficial to martial artists of any style to cultivate a sense of rhythm and a sense of timing, to be able to ‘listen to’ and ‘hear’ combat, in order to grow as a martial artist.

In a similar vein, Caterina McEvoy, Senior Lecturer at Leeds College of Music, focused on Lee's martial arts philosophy and its relation to sound art. Focusing in particular on installations and percussion, McEvoy connected the philosophical components of jeet kune do, namely Lee's Daoist and Buddhist influences, with key concepts in music performance such as phasing, timing, and improvisation.
In an interesting twist, David Brown of Cardiff Metropolitan University analyzed Lee from the perspective of physical charm and charisma. Combining the insights of Max Weber and Chris Shilling, Brown explored the nature and significance of Lee’s physicality and his body as a force on society and a source of global change.

Also coming from Cardiff Metropolitan University, George Jennings went in a slightly different direction. Jennings also used Chris Shilling as a theoretical jumping off point, but he was concerned with analyzing Lee as the founder of a martial art. Using a comparative approach that juxtaposed Lee and his founding of jeet kune do with Edward William Barton-Wright’s founding of Bartitsu and Marisela Ugalde Velázquez de León’s founding of Xilam, Jennings outlined five preconditions for the creation of a new martial art, arguing that:

1. The creator must be proficient in one or more martial art.

2. He/she must have certain practical ability, combat capabilities, self-confidence, and charisma.

3. He/she not be the top student, master, or descendent in/of another martial art.

4. He/she experience a physical crisis or be dissatisfied with his/her own body and/or experiences a sociopolitical crisis.

5. He/she responds to said crisis by seeking to improve as a martial artist, necessitating the creation of a new martial art.

For another look at Lee’s combative philosophy, Lyn Jehu, a lecturer at the University of South Wales, explored the legacy of Lee’s critique of ‘traditional’ martial arts teaching and practice in his epochal essay ‘Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate’. Though famous for his animus against the ‘classical mess’ of traditional martial arts practice and for his insistence on freedom and innovation, Jehu provided a historically nuanced examination of the terms of Lee’s critique. To Jehu’s mind, Lee’s target was not at all ‘traditional’; rather, Lee’s animus should have been directed at the modernized (if not bastardized) forms of traditional martial arts like karate, for the historical traditions of many martial arts, including karate, consist of similarly iconoclastic martial artists committed to freedom of exploration and innovation in teaching and practice. With references to other historical figures, most notably Kenwa Mabuni, Jehu provocatively invited martial arts studies scholars and historians to take another look at the history of martial arts practice and, rather than fetishize Lee’s breaks from various methods and practices, to seek out similarities and continuities with other traditions and figures through history.

From yet another perspective, Vera Kérchy, senior lecturer at Szeged University in Hungary, began her presentation from the observation that French avant-garde playwright and theatre director Bernard-Marie Koltès (1948-1989) was a big fan of Bruce Lee’s kung fu movies. Accordingly, she argued that there is a close relationship between, on the one hand, Koltès’ rebellious drama ‘Solitude of the Cotton Fields’ and ‘Roberto Zucco’, and on the other, Bruce Lee’s The Way of the Dragon and Enter the Dragon. As Kérchy argued, Lee exerted considerable influence on Koltès’ work, providing him with ideas of ‘survival confrontation’ and ‘continuous violence’ for his dramas. Furthermore, Lee’s simple and direct style of fighting inspired Koltès to promote a concise, realistic, and unpretentious mode of dramatic expression. In Koltès’ work, Kérchy believed, language is expressed with the same impact as Lee’s fists in his films.

Still in relation to films, Lindsay Steenberg, senior lecturer at Oxford Brookes University, placed Bruce Lee and his films in the context of the global action movies of the 1960s and 1970s. More specifically, she situated Lee in a long tradition of gladiator media and iconography. According to Steenberg, more than just a martial artist, Lee can also be understood in the cinematic history of the heroic gladiator. Beyond the famous gladiatorial showdown in the Roman Colosseum between Lee and Chuck Norris in The Way of the Dragon, Lee’s entire screen persona constitutes a transnational, transhistorical fusion of gladiator archetypes and a potent masculine identity.

Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park from Hong Kong University went in a very different direction – into the topic of national identity. Park explored the potentially racist aspects at work in the dubbing of Enter the Dragon. Despite his rising stardom, Park maintained that there was a battle of egos behind the Enter the Dragon scenes, one that spilled over into the screenplay, evidence of which is discernible in Lee’s dubbed voice work. In the hostile environment produced by the ill-will between Lee and screenwriter Michael Allin, Park argued that the script ended up packed with words intended to be particularly difficult for the non-native English-language speaker Lee to pronounce.

Luke White, senior lecturer in visual culture at the University of Middlesex, explored Western conceptions of ‘masculinity’ and various warrior images in relation to Bruce Lee, focusing ultimately on the recent Netflix series Daredevil (2015-2018). White’s presentation provided an examination of Daredevil’s many complex and contradictory elements, from technological innovation in martial arts to classical training and from progressive multiculturalism to racist orientalism, and he enthusiastically and expertly took everyone through the nuances and the implications of Daredevil’s storytelling.
Wayne Wong, from King’s College London, argued that research into Bruce Lee’s films has hitherto focused primarily on the sociopolitical elements of the plots and their cultural reception over time. Yet, rather than this, Wong encouraged scholars to start to explore its aesthetic composition, and, in particular, its uniquely Chinese composition. According to Wong, Lee’s films not only provide realistic martial arts action, they also provide insights into a Chinese philosophical concept that Wong explored under the heading of ‘martial ideation’. In Lee’s films, Wong proposed, the ebb and flow of calm and tranquility is rooted in Daoist ‘nothingness’, and from this Daoist foundation Lee elevated kung fu cinema to a place that captured the probative value of exploring ideation in film.

Li Siu Leung, professor of cultural studies at Lingnan University in Hong Kong, emphasized Lee’s admirable commitment to philosophical inquiry. Connecting Lee to Mencius, Li distinguished Lee from his fellow martial arts movie peers Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Donnie Yen on the basis of Lee’s desire to be a martial artist of both ‘pen’ and ‘sword’. Lee, according to Li, was not only an impressive martial artist but an impressive thinker, and Li sought to encourage fans of Lee to follow in his footsteps not just to the path of martial arts but to the path of philosophy and to commit themselves to ‘read carefully, ponder deeply, and experience truly’.

Finally, Kyle Barrowman, co-organizer of the conference, presented a provocative paper in which, similar to Li’s desire to explore Lee’s philosophical roots, he strove to illuminate a ‘perfectionist’ ethos at the core of Lee’s philosophical enterprise. Moving away from typical scholarship on Lee in which national identity is the focus and Eastern philosophy takes precedence, Barrowman connected Lee’s ideas to the Western philosophical tradition of perfectionism traced by the late American philosopher Stanley Cavell and most emblematically captured, to Barrowman’s mind, in the philosophical writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Ayn Rand. Ultimately, Barrowman encouraged a balancing of the philosophical scales vis-à-vis Bruce Lee between East and West and implored scholars to move beyond Buddhism and Daoism in order to explore in a more comprehensive fashion the many influences on and currents in Lee’s philosophical thinking.

In conclusion, then, scholars from all over the world came to the conference to engage in a productive and provocative dialogue, casting remarkable light on the many legacies of Bruce Lee. More than ‘geeking out’ in fandom or paying tribute to an influential legend, those who participated in the ‘Bruce Lee’s Cultural Legacies’ conference conducted well-researched, engaging, and insightful investigations into the man and his works, as well as the myths, legends and diverse legacies that developed in his wake. Many of the ideas were novel and inspired, and many conclusions challenging and thought-provoking. By virtue of this conference, which brought together so many different scholars from so many different perspectives, places, and institutions, we in the audience, like all present, came away with an enhanced understanding of the cultural legacies and the cultural value of Bruce Lee, as well as a strong sense of the stimulating and bright future of martial arts studies.
In Risk, Failure, Play: What Dance Reveals about Martial Arts Training, Janet O’Shea addresses the question of ‘how and why sport fighting feels so profoundly different from real-world violence’ [5]. Seeing as this is a question that I have grappled with myself [see Channon and Matthews 2018], I was intrigued by the premise of O’Shea’s book, and I thoroughly enjoyed reading the discussion she engages in by way of an answer. As a practicing martial artist and scholar, O’Shea brings a personally reflective, theoretically informed perspective to resolving the paradoxes that arise around and within combat sports, principally as they pertain to the issue of ‘violence’, and in so doing offers an argument that should be of great interest to practitioners and researchers of martial arts alike. The book’s eight substantive chapters present a comprehensive engagement with the ‘stuff’ of these activities – their meanings, spaces, rules, core practices and so on – to flesh out the author’s central premise: That through engaging in the risky ‘kinetic play’ of martial arts we can build skills needed to develop ourselves as human beings in ways which may be conducive to tackling some of the core political problems of our times. In this sense, O’Shea’s text not only addresses the intriguing question of what makes sport-based fighting different from ‘real’ violence but also seeks to connect this discussion with much wider concerns.

Key to grasping O’Shea’s analysis are a series of conceptual points, each of which highlights an apparent paradox of martial artistry. These are all neatly argued throughout the text, illustrated principally through the use of vignettes and personal reflections. The first of these points is the ‘distinction between sign and meaning’ [28] within the action of combat sports, whereby fighters in sport settings typically do not attach the same meanings to sport fights as they (and others) do to other types of fights. Alternative meanings from those typically imagined for these activities – punching, kicking, and so on – are socially constructed via rules, spaces, and norms of etiquette in martial arts settings. In particular, rather than punches and kicks signifying hostility and intentional harm, they take on the quality of devices that are used to test oneself and others, such that the opportunity to exchange pain-inducing blows becomes something fighters actively seek out.

The construction of such meanings places the experience of fighting in a completely different sphere compared to that associated with interpersonal violence, leading into the second core concept of O’Shea’s analysis. That is, fighting in this way, rather than premised upon conflict with another person, actually becomes a form of pleasurable self-discovery, achieved through playful sparring exchanges which nevertheless involve vigorous confrontation in order to deliver a desired type of introspection. Such learning is, O’Shea argues, typically configured around the experience of failure, itself brought on by exposure to the (superior) abilities of others. She writes that ‘without the constant reminder of the abilities of others human beings, we can
grow in our imagination to superhuman stature. It's easy to envision ourselves as undefeated in contests we never participate in' [64]. With such valuable learning at stake, the experience of sparring or competition fighting therefore means that, as fighters, we actually 'confront ourselves through our confrontation with others' [68].

Thirdly, O'Shea’s attention to the political implications of such practice draws primarily on the notion of 'oppositional civility', a quality that, when practiced, is conducive to the formation of 'agonistic, respectful community' [34]. In short, by submitting ourselves to the regimes of martial arts training that regularly involve being beaten by others, we learn to explore our own as well as our partners' vulnerabilities in a context framed by trust and mutual respect. This requires sustained effort to support and take care of one another while maintaining an interaction that is fundamentally built around forceful, physical confrontation, carefully managing risks to ourselves and each other as we do so. Instead of being a means to conquer or destroy another person, then, fighting together in this way can give us the means to build meaningful bonds of trust and friendship with them, whilst also teaching us how to manage interpersonal conflict in a dignified, restrained, and respectful manner. Ultimately, one would hope, such personal and relational transformations creates fertile ground for more civil forms of discourse in cultural contexts increasingly defined by polarising, socially divisive politics. In addition, although not the core focus of her analysis, O'Shea discusses how such processes hold particular value for the enfranchisement and empowerment of socially marginalised groups, noting the significance of these phenomena for contemporary forms of structural inequality.

While there is much in O'Shea's analysis that I agree with (and, if I'm being honest, wish I'd written myself), there are some criticisms to make as well. One of these is a relatively minor stylistic complaint that nevertheless holds interesting conceptual relevance for debates over the place and meaning of 'violence' in fighting sports. Despite arguing several times that 'play is (not) a rehearsal for real life … rather, play is itself a real situation' [48], O'Shea regularly uses terminology that frames sport fights (noted as 'play' in the quote above) as 'simulated' [29] versions of 'real' fights – those wherein form (e.g. punches) and function (e.g. causing harm) are 'reunited' [33]. To me, this risks implying that the true, original, perhaps essential function of fighting always remains that of causing harm to another person, such that the actions of fights need to be transformed or 'reconstructed' [90] before they can mean anything else. I read this as something of a theoretical inconsistency, having otherwise seen in O'Shea's discussion a proposition that sport fighting and so-called 'real' fighting fall within completely different paradigms of human interaction which, although they can collapse into one another, nevertheless exist separately.

Indeed, for many if not most practitioners of the combat sports O'Shea is writing about, their only encounters with fighting are likely to be within the sporting contexts she describes; such practitioners' experience of punches and kicks (etc.) should not, therefore, need to be transformed into something else, if it has only ever existed for them with the meanings associated with play, learning, and so on that are mentioned above. Although I am talking about relatively minor uses of words and phrases here, which might come off as a

1 I was particularly pleased to see an entire chapter dedicated to discussing empowerment-based self-defence, which is too often overlooked by martial arts studies researchers. O'Shea argues here that the understanding of comparable vulnerabilities and strengths (of male and female bodies) is radically equalizing [162] vis-à-vis the gendered politics of (male-to-female) violence, aligning her analysis well with much of the literature on this phenomenon.

2 Although I am certainly willing to admit that, given my own interest in this topic and sympathy with this particular conceptualisation of fighting/violence, my reading may be a little preferential here.
pedantic criticism, it actually highlights something important about the book’s subject matter. That is, it seems as though the difficulty of perceiving fights outside of the paradigm of violent confrontation – a problem that O’Shea has set out to resolve – has actually left its own mark on her analysis, suggesting that such widely-held conceptualisations are difficult to shift in practice despite the best efforts of theoretical analysis. This issue probably deserves more explicit handling than is given on the pages of *Risk, Failure, Play*, potentially opening further research questions regarding the place of ‘violence’ as a reference point within the experience of combat sports participants; and particularly those for whom ‘actual’ or ‘real’ violence is an entirely unfamiliar phenomenon.

Terminological quibbling aside, a further criticism is that at times I felt that the book might’ve benefited from a more thorough engagement with previous empirical research literature on themes such as risk and institutional violence in sport, especially when discussing professional combat sport athletes, as these topics felt a little under-theorised compared to others. Also, literature on the phenomenon of healthism and self-objectification, a growing interest in sport sociology, might’ve been useful to consult when briefly discussing contemporary fitness culture as an example of the tensions between work and play – an important moment in the development of the book’s thesis. While I definitely enjoyed the style of writing, which is both accessible and entertaining, O’Shea’s tendency towards using theory largely in conjunction with self-reflection, rather than prioritising empirical research literature and systematic data gathering on given phenomena, left me occasionally wondering if engaging more directly with a wider range of previous studies might’ve opened further avenues for analysis of her own material. That said, O’Shea does explain in the prologue that her focus is on theorising personally meaningful experiences through a phenomenological lens, rather than conducting a formal ethnographic study *per se*. And, as I noted above, the end result remains a powerful and engaging narrative on a key contemporary issue for martial arts studies, despite (or perhaps even because of) its relatively narrow methodological focus.

In sum then, *Risk, Failure, Play* offers a compelling discussion of the social value of combat sports, foregrounding their personally edifying potential and the role such processes may play in building more civil, respectful, and egalitarian approaches to conflict and disagreement. O’Shea carefully avoids overstating her analyses, reminding readers that ‘play’ fights can themselves become violent and that positive, transformational outcomes of sports are never guaranteed. She ultimately argues that, while socially supportive risk-taking and failure-embracing play can’t cure all of our personal or social ills, they provide the chance to learn skills that might help us do so. In this way, O’Shea brings her engaging, insightful and neatly-written analysis to a fittingly optimistic conclusion.

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