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

By

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Abstract

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

Introduction

Martial arts films, perhaps unlike any other sub-genre of film, maintain a unique relationship with their spectators. Martial arts, when exhibited in film, signify a mode of conflict resolution that is at once brutal and elegant. The complex choreography characteristic of martial arts films led early analysts to the association between them and the musical genre (e.g., Kaminsky, 1974), especially musicals punctuated with complex choreography of the kind associated with Fred Astair, Ginger Rogers, Gene Kelley, Mitzey Gainer, and Donald O’Conner. While I will not pursue an analysis of martial arts films from the perspective of spectators, I do wish to emphasize the extent to which fans of martial arts films actively participate in the completion of the filmic experience. To a certain extent, spectators are drawn to martial arts films with an eye toward reconstructing choreographed fight scenes. That is, both practicing martial artists and those merely stimulated by what they perceive to be a form of lethal poetry, view martial arts films to glean techniques. In my experience as a practicing martial artist, I have known many skilled associates (black and brown belts) who scan newly released martial arts films to watch their favorite on-screen fighters, hoping to catch a glimpse of something new that they may be able to graft on to their technique. I mention this here, at the outset, because I
believe that martial arts films represent perhaps the clearest path to recognition of associations between filmic imagery and spectatorial mimesis. This has particular relevance for sociologists interested in the ways in which films within the action-cop and gangster genres contribute to the proliferation of violence in America. But it further anticipates the kind of argument I will put forth in this essay, namely, that spectatorial involvement of the kind associated with martial arts films creates a milieu wherein a web of political, economic, and cultural associations assume greater significance. Simply put, when spectators become enveloped in filmic discourses, when they suspend disbelief, the potential for manipulation of the kind intimated by Adorno and Horkheimer, Brecht, and others, intensifies. So, while this is not an analysis of spectatorship, the relevance of the discourses that will be discussed in this essay is intimately related to it.

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

What martial arts bodies possess is mastery over movement. Spectators can delight in the ability demonstrated by martial artists to determine their every movement with precision. Moreover, martial artists are always in control of their situations. Regardless of the number of attackers, martial arts films present the hero as a hard body capable of dispensing with any competitor. This combination of artful mastery over movement and ability to control violent situations suggests that martial arts films signify multiple desires in spectators. In screen theory the ideological relevance of the star as personification (signifier) of all desirable (especially masculine) skills suggests that the embodiment of these skills in one person makes them appear natural. Stars signify the ideal. What spectators see when they witness stars on screen will differ depending on their experiences, expectations, and the like. The character portrayed by the star will possess qualities desired by the spectator, and for the time they are able to view the film, spectators will experience a sort of wish fulfillment. The ideological ramifications suggest that when spectators view martial artists on screen (people who both in their actual life as skilled practitioners and with the help of cinematography are capable of miraculous feats of bravery and technique), they are likely to interpret those star images as real representations of what men (and more frequently women) should and can be. That is, stars possess in their characters all desirable qualities of a man, and a woman. When compared to them, we, the spectators, fall far short. The ideological ramifications are clear. If they can do it, why can’t I? According to genre conventions, individuals can survive without the group, competition is better than cooperation, and violence will solve our most dreaded problems. Spectators experience catharsis after viewing films because of the
incompleteness of our subjectivity, our divided selves (Lacan, 1977). Stars have no divided self; they are whole. For martial arts films this aspect of spectatorship is even more prevalent than in the action-cop genre generally. Spectators are aware that the stars they view on screen can actually perform many, if not all, of the techniques demonstrated on screen. Similar to viewing athletes in any sport, the sense of mastery over bodily movement is total. When these performances are crafted for film, all of the necessary components are in place (e.g., urban landscapes, music, lighting, and costumes) to inflate the image of the star and his or her skills into the realm of fantasy.

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

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

Ideological Relevance of Martial Arts Films as Genre

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

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

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

**Genre and Masculinity**

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

The Films: The Glimmer Man and Dragon Fire

The Glimmer Man

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

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

The opening scene of the film produces the first causal act, initiating the relationship between the police and what appears to be a serial murder. In this scene, police detective Jack Cole (Seagal) is introduced to his new partner, Jim Campbell (Wayans). Campbell is a veteran with the Los Angeles Police Department. This scene is used to initiate the multiple character differences between Cole and Campbell. Cole is dressed all in black, wearing beads draped around his neck (and Seagal’s signature ponytail). This is in obvious distinction to the more conventional dress of his new partner, Campbell, and each of the other detectives with whom he will interact. The inducement to action is initiated while Cole and Campbell ride together in Campbell’s unmarked patrol car. Cole accepts a call for assistance to confront a teenager who has taken a hostage at a local Catholic high school. Campbell chides him for responding by saying that it’s not their responsibility. Cole responds by saying, “We’re in the neighborhood.” Upon arrival at the school, Cole approaches the room where Johnny Deverell, the student hostage taker, is holding a gun on his classmates. This scene makes use of a handheld camera. Having convinced Johnny to release his young female hostage, but without being seen, Cole bursts through the door to the classroom with his gun pointed at Johnny. The camera zooms in
(employing a profile shot) on the cocked hammer of the weapon, then slides along the arms of Cole without losing sight of the gun, until the camera is facing Johnny. Johnny places his gun to his head, despondent over the news that his girlfriend is leaving him. Cole rushes Johnny, carrying him through the window behind him and into a room one story below. With debris all around, and Johnny now safely lying on top of him, Cole remarks, “I hate this job.” Once on the ground, Cole is lightly reprimanded by Campbell for not awaiting backup (“This isn’t New York”). This scene is important because Johnny turns out to be the son of the American arms dealer, Deverell. When Cole is later approached by Deverell’s bodyguard, Donald, to testify in court that Johnny is insane and needs to be committed, Cole dismisses him. Donald attempts to pressure Cole by claiming that Deverell is a very powerful man, someone who could make or break a career. Cole responds by saying, “Tell your asshole boss, that no one threatens me.”

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

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

The additional details of Cole’s life are extrapolated using few extra characters. His current wife, or girlfriend, appears only briefly during a scene when Cole tells her that Ellen, his ex-wife, has become one of the crucifixion murder victims. And through his conversation with his former commander, Smith, we learn of his lethal skills. Like Rambo, Cole was the product of United States military training. Given his association with Smith as his mentor and former commanding officer, Smith is clearly a character who stimulates action. Beyond these scattered insights, there is little in the way of additional information forthcoming. As for Cole’s partner, Campbell, we learn virtually nothing. Aside from his frequent on-screen ranting and handling of routine, Campbell’s character is shallow.
The Glimmer Man is a film that seeks to establish Seagal’s character as more than “just a cop.” His superficial flirtations with the symbolism of Buddhism attempt to create a clear departure from the “evil” characters in the film. So while the film makes a weak attempt to develop the character of Cole as one who stands apart from the crowd, this cannot be said about any other characters; simply too little information is provided.

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

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

Dragon Fire

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In a street scene (again at night, as no one in this film ventures out during the day), Laker spots his brother’s leather jacket, now being worn by a Rastafarian who witnessed the murder. He confronts the man, claims the jacket, and transmogrifies into the “dark side” previously inhabited by his brother. In each of the remaining scenes, Laker is shown wearing nothing but black shirts and his brother’s black leather jacket. The symbolic transformation of Laker is accompanied in the film by more obvious references. For example, following his first victory in the junker, Laker meets Slick at the Trocadero 2000 to recoup his winnings. As he enters the bar, the soundtrack blasts, “When I get to the dark side....” It is also at this point that Laker gives in to the tempestuous Marta; the two confirm their feelings for each other, first by kissing, and later by sharing an intimate love scene.
Aside from his pursuit to avenge the death of his brother, so little in the way of character development takes place that Laker comes off as a superficial, almost cardboard protagonist. The same cannot be said for his nemesis, Slick. Slick is motivated by revenge and money. He befriends Laker by passing along his insider’s wisdom of the junker, the only place Laker will find his brother’s killer. Slick informs Laker that Johnny was not well liked. In the opening scene of the film, we watch as Johnny sadistically defeats an opponent at the junker. Following his victory Johnny is jumped in an alley. Slick sees in Laker an opportunity to make money as a fighter in the junker. In some scenes shot with a visually interesting use of oblique angles and dim lighting, Slick appears as a tall, beret and sunglasses wearing mentor. While Laker works the heavy bag, Slick recites words of Buddhist fighting wisdom from memory. He appears as a streetwise philosopher.

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

There are two secondary characters in the film, Eddie and Marta, who help complete the outline of the primary characters. Among the two, Eddie is most interesting. This film was clearly written to convey an image of a world in chaos. There are no scenes shot during the day, where, one presumes, daylight may intimate hope or possibility. The only conveyance of hope and happiness comes through the character Eddie. At no point in the film does Eddie curse, get angry, scheme, manipulate, or do anything that may suggest a person who has given up – this despite living a meager life (he relies on his sister Marta to pay the rent, and on his proficiency at the junker for spending money). During a training scene involving Slick, Laker, and Eddie, Eddie is brought to the training facility that had, up to that time, been solely occupied by Laker and Slick. Slick invited Eddie to serve as a sparring partner for Laker. Since Laker and Eddie are friends, it is difficult to get either of the men to press to the point that would be necessary to prepare for fighting in the junker. Slick shouts to Eddie that he will pay him various sums of money if he will hit Laker. Finally, when the amount is right, he does. At that point, Laker takes him out. Eddie, bloodied, simply bounces off the floor, still smiling, to congratulate Laker on his skill. Even in those scenes involving Eddie fighting at the junker, he remains optimistic. My sense is that Eddie represents those who persist, regardless of their circumstances, never stooping to devalue themselves. Eddie was a refreshing juxtaposition to the gloominess of the film.
The last of the secondary characters is Marta. Marta’s character is not well defined. What we learn about her is very superficial. Initially, Marta and Eddie share an apartment. To pay the bills, Marta dances in a strip bar. While Marta does begin to show an interest in Laker (although the reasons for this are never explained), her role in the film never moves too far beyond window dressing. In some ways she serves in a role much like Eddie – a juxtaposition to the ugliness pervasive on earth. However, the superficiality of her character, and its presence in the film as an object of the male gaze, serves the obvious function of appealing to the targeted male spectator. This character signifies the perpetuation of female degradation in martial arts and actions films generally.

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

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

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

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

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

The second act is constituted by multiple villains, mostly minor characters, who put our hero to the test. This characterizes the action of both films. It is also the case that spectators learn of the villains’ primary motivation – greed. Again, this characterizes each film. The action-cop genre of the 1980s and 1990s inherited the 1960s and 1970s distrust of bureaucrats. But it is also the case that the lone hero has the primary intention of preserving law and order. His critique of dominant political, economic, or cultural institutions never gets in the way of his preservation of them. Rather, our hero’s philosophy is organized around a hard-boiled belief that the individual is better equipped to handle problems than a group. As such, it is typically the case that our rogue cop realizes that in order to resolve the conflict he will have to bypass convention and resort to extreme measures. Again, the audience has been prepared for this through the numerous scenes of sadistic violence perpetrated by the villain. Since the genre established the inability of conventional law enforcement to effectively eliminate the problem, the hero must go it alone using any measure of skill at his disposal. Finally, the last of the second act genre conventions is moral clarity; matters of right and wrong are clearly discernible.
The Glimmer Man makes use of the “inefficiency of law enforcement” narrative convention to legitimate the use of extreme force (Cole slits throats with a razor blade in a credit card, etc.). The primary motivation for the villains in this film is greed, maximizing profits from the illegal sale of stolen Russian munitions. As if spectators missed the point relative to the immorality of our villains, The Glimmer Man invokes a religious motif. Not only have the villains violated the sanctity of human life, but by invoking crucifixion, they have declared war on God. The ideological juxtaposition of Russians, the CIA, and the Super rich with God indicate more than the desire to clarify moral righteousness. And with the exception of the inclusion of the Russian mafia (the Soviet Union has always supplied the action genre with its villainous negative other), this juxtaposition of discursive representations could be viewed as a progressive polarity. In The Glimmer Man, moral clarity hits you over the head like an axe kick.4

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

The question posed by Dragon Fire is whether there can be justice by any means other than absolute revenge leading to death. In case spectators are not certain of this, at one point in the film Laker appears desperate and angry but uncertain as to what to do. Slick shouts at him. “What do you want Laker, you want justice or revenge? Because if it’s justice you want, you’re on the wrong fucking planet.” It’s hard to be more explicit than that. Clearly, the reference suggests not only the ineffectual nature of law enforcement, but the more conservative position articulated in action-cop films of the early 1970s (Dirty Harry, Death Wish) that verges on fascism. This is a world where only vigilante justice will do. This is the hero’s moral dilemma, and in this instance the hero chooses revenge. What is curious, however, is it is Slick, the man who will be the eventual target of Laker’s revenge, who confirms for Laker the position he must adopt. Again, given the circumstances presented around Johnny’s death, moral ambiguity marks this film.
Act three offers the audience what Brown calls “the hero’s redemption.” It is during the final act that the hero “systematically eliminates the villain and his cohorts, each of whom suffers a unique and excessively violent death (p. 82).” Heroes are redeemed in the eyes of legitimate criminal justice; as Brown asserts, “their way was right (p. 82).” The final scene in both The Glimmer Man and Dragon Fire produces the kind of redemption Brown refers to. In The Glimmer Man, violence escalates in direct proportion to the significance of each of the villains. For example, the closing scene is of Donald, Deverell’s security man, descending a window and being impaled on a wrought-iron fence below. His figure, from above, takes the shape of a crucifixion. This is a deserved fate since it was Donald who murdered and crucified throughout the film.

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

Conclusion

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

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

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


Endnotes

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

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

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

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

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

**Author:** Peter Brooks  
**Publisher:** University of Chicago Press  
**Year:** 2000

Peter Brooks has produced a remarkably insightful analysis of the status of confession in law, literature, religion, and psychoanalysis and, at the same time, provided a landmark demonstration of the value of interdisciplinary legal scholarship. In part, the quality of this book as an example of how materials and perspectives from the humanities enrich and enliven legal analysis comes from its very unselfconsciousness about its vindication of interdisciplinary work. It is direct and focused on what Brooks calls "speaking guilt," a subject that, as any student of law knows, long has been a vexing one.

As well written and engaging as this book is, like any first rate piece of scholarship that draws rigorously and thoughtfully on texts from a variety of traditions, it is demanding on its readers. It is demanding in the range of its references: from Rousseau and Dostoevsky, to Freud and Lacan, from *Miranda v. Arizona* to sociological materials on police interrogation. Each of these sources is treated with great subtlety and careful attention. Brooks is the kind of scholar whose range of understanding and breadth of reading allows him to move easily from one genre to another.

The payoff of this facility is an engaging argument about the way law comes to terms with the Fifth Amendment's guarantee against "compulsory" self-incrimination. Confessions, Brooks argues, are at one and the same time an indispensable aid to law enforcement and an object of suspicion. We both need them, and yet worry lest those who confess not be subject to unconstitutional compulsion. We desire confession on the assumption that the guilt spoken from the mouth of the guilty wrong doer is unusually reliable, trustworthy, and truthful. We assuage our concern by insisting that those who speak their own guilt do so "voluntarily."

Much of *Troubling Confessions* is an inquiry into these two issues: truth and voluntariness, an effort to use insights from literature, religion, and psychoanalysis to examine the adequacy and accuracy of law's treatment of the truth value of confessions and law's assessment of the conditions conducive to, or indicative of, the voluntariness of confessions. What he finds both illuminates and complicates the stories revealed and told in cases like *Miranda*.

In Brooks's view, those stories are often reductive and unreal, necessary perhaps to the vindication of a normative system grounded in assumptions about will and responsibility, but nonetheless out of touch with the complexities that are always associated with confessions, especially at the current time. At times Brooks is sympathetic toward law's necessary simplifications; at other times less patient and understanding. "Human law," he writes, "may not so much mimic as parody divine or psychic law when it deals with the individual's self-expression in confessional discourse. For the law takes literally what the other two domains express symbolically." (p. 142).

But it is not only the distinction between the literal and the symbolic that marks the boundaries of these domains. Attending to accounts of confession in
literature, religion, and psychoanalysis suggests that whatever "truth" it reveals is "intersubjective," "transactional," and "transferential." There is no simple truth that confession can and does reveal. Confessions are almost always produced in a relationship to, or dialogue with, a confessor. That relationship with its affect and allure conditions the knowledge/revelations that confessions produce. And, in a fascinating analysis of the performative character of confession, Brooks argues that confession allows for a complex staging of scenes of exposure, guilt, and retribution such that confession is as likely to produce as reveal guilt. The more one confesses, the more guilt is produced, the more one needs to confess.

Throughout the book Brooks reminds his readers of the dangers of the search for "transparency," for an unmediated access to the truths of persons. Transparency, he says, can be allied both to virtue and terror. While the law prizes confessions for the truths they reveal, what is performed may have more to do with a truth of the self, in all of its opaqueness, than with "the truth of fact." (p. 141)

If law prizes confession because of the truth that it assumes confession reveals, law insists that no confession can be accepted, or admitted into a legal proceeding, unless it is "voluntary." Troubling Confessions is at its best in its readings of cases where courts have tried to grapple with and define the requirements of the Fifth Amendment. Especially noteworthy is the analysis of Justice Frankfurter's opinion in Culombe v. Connecticut. At the heart of Frankfurter's opinion was the suggestion that Culombe's confession was the product of an "overborne will." (p. 68). In this part of the book Brooks shows how the law's conception of the individual before the law depends on a particular concept of the will. That concept sees the confessing subject as choosing whether or not to speak or remain silent. It imagines that the choice is, or can be, a voluntary one, that it proceeds from and reflects the autonomy and dignity of the choosing agent. Whether employing a totality of circumstances test or the bright line rule of Miranda, the effort is to identify and protect a moment in which confessions can be understood to be freely given.

Brooks rightly notes that the abstractions of the Supreme Court's opinions in this area sit side-by-side with the quotidian efforts of police to exact confessions through manipulation, trickery, and deceit. In this sense the law speaks in two voices and seeks to have it both ways. Yet Brooks's argument does not depend wholly on this suggestion about the gap between law on the books and law in action. Instead, as in his analysis of the truths that confessions speak, he again turns to literature, religion, and psychoanalysis. Bringing these resources to bear suggests that confession always proceeds from dependency and abjection rather than autonomy and dignity.

People confess because they are compelled to do so, not physically, perhaps not even by the acts of others. What, Troubling Confessions asks, are the sources of the compulsion to speak? Suggestive answers abound in this book. Here let me mention just two. First, is the force of broad cultural pressures associated with the pervasiveness of confession as a mode of discourse in American culture. In Clinton's impeachment, the popularity of the "tell all" book and of the Oprah-style talk show, Brooks finds evidence of the "banalization" of confession in the culture. (p. 6) Yet, one might ask, can the culture exert an irresistible pressure to confess even as it renders confession banal? What is the mechanism through which any individual participates in this process?

The second factor operating to limit the possibilities of voluntariness is found in the bonds between confessant and confessor. Brooks argues that confession
requires a relationship: between writer and readers, penitent and priest, patient and analyst, suspect and interrogator. Each of these relationships are characterized by dependency, subjection, fear, and desires to appease and please. So strong are these factors that people may confess to things that they did not do. In this case Brooks is surely right, but I am left wondering whether the factors in relationships between confessant and confessor that he so skillfully unpacks are felt equally in all types of those relationships. In places Brooks seems to write as if they are; still it would seem worthwhile to ask when, where, and why those relationships operate to compel confessions.

Confession, Brooks concludes, must, in order to satisfy the Constitution, be called voluntary while everything conduces to assure it is not. This is a powerful and well documented assertion, powerful in exposing the fictions through which law often operates, well documented in Brooks's skillful marshaling of disparate sources from both inside and outside law. Yet even as he reaches this conclusion, about the inadequacy of law's account of the process of speaking guilt, Brooks remains respectful of law's enterprise. Indeed some readers will find him too respectful, too patient with a situation in which law's fictions produce unjust results. Others will be disappointed that having provided an analysis that undermines law's assumptions about truth and voluntariness in confession that Brooks recommends neither reform nor radical alterations in legal practices.

Nonetheless, there is much to learn about the distance between law and the psychological and social lives that its subjects lead from Brooks's consideration of confession. We may not be able to make law more responsive to those lives, and perhaps we should not, in all cases, imagine that we can close the gap. But what Brooks has done is to explore and expose the way law effaces the realities in which it is embedded, denies the doubleness and ambivalence that surround many of the transactions in which it is involved everyday, and still manages to get on with its business. Troubling Confessions provides a striking reminder of how difficult it is to choose silence in the face of demands that we speak as well as a sterling example of the virtues of scholarship that crosses boundaries and draws law into a colloquy with disciplines beyond its boundaries. For those involved in this enterprise, it is a welcome and, at times, inspiring, model.

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Review of *Synthetic Panics—The Symbolic Politics of Designer Drugs*

Author: Philip Jenkins  
Publisher: New York University Press  
Year: 1999

In the late 1920s, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) planned and then implemented a nationwide system for reporting and recording crime. The way Michael Maltz tells the story, the primary motivation for the new crime statistics program was the fact that the members of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) were concerned about “the publicity about ‘crime waves’ generated by the press” (1977:32). At that time neither the FBI nor the IACP would have thought about their problem in these terms, but in fact they were trying to avert what apparently was about to become an early twentieth century moral panic.

According to Howard Becker, in society there are moral crusaders who are so offended by certain social actions or phenomena that they create moral panics to stigmatize as evil that which they find offensive (1963:147-8). Over the years, Philip Jenkins has demonstrated that he has a good eye for a moral panic. For example, he showed it when he explored the popular image of serial killers as a phenomenon that never really was what it was proclaimed to be (1994a), and he showed it again in his analysis of the public response to a menacing ice age that never arrived (1994b).

In his new book on moral panics related to manufactured chemicals, sardonically named *Synthetic Panics*, Jenkins again shows his ability to understand and appreciate a good moral panic. Using his own words to describe what others have argued about twentieth century drug scares, in this book Jenkins shows how “the intensity of cultural reactions to a particular chemical does not necessarily reflect the actual social harm or individual damage it causes” (p. 2-3). Specifically, using several examples of what are popularly known as “designer drugs,” Jenkins demonstrates how American culture in the late twentieth century has repeatedly responded to symbolic crusades that have been grounded in the uncertain terrain of public hysteria about synthetic chemical substances.

In the first chapter, Jenkins identifies and explains the sociological themes he is writing about and places his argument about synthetic drugs in the context of earlier research on drugs, drug scares, and symbolic crusades. In this chapter he highlights the semiotic value of drugs for symbolic crusaders intent on fomenting moral panic in America, the importance of the media in this process, and the interest of contemporary scholars—particularly social constructionists—in this phenomenon. He also acknowledges the difficulties of conceptualizing “synthetic drugs” and defining “designer drugs.”

Each succeeding chapter tells a story of a moral panic and a symbolic crusade involving a particular synthetic drug. For example, in Chapter Two, “Speed Kills,” Jenkins tells the story of methamphetamines in the 1960s. He describes how this manufactured drug was associated with “such familiar villains as the Mafia and outlaw motorcycle gangs” (p. 30) and consequently “developed a powerful, damaging association with extreme aggression and violence, through
its ability to turn users into amoral speed freaks” (p. 29). He shows how a synthetic drug originally manufactured by legitimate pharmaceutical companies that was once not only legal but also widely popular became the object of a moral panic that ultimately resulted in “strict legislation and a significant expansion of federal criminal-justice powers” (p. 38).

In Chapter Eight, “Rave Drugs and Rape Drugs,” Jenkins writes about a class of synthetic drugs that gained notoriety during the middle of the 1990s. He tells the story of how the party culture associated with teenagers resulted in fear among their baby-boomer parents and consequently an anti-drug response by the media and government agencies. These drugs, such as GHB and Rohypnol, were linked to wild parties and sexual molestation. In his conclusion to the chapter he wrote, “For all their inaccuracies, media reports about Rohypnol and GHB had an overwhelming impact on public perceptions of the substances, which were now irrevocably labeled rape drugs” (p. 182).

Other chapters tell the stories of PCP, Ecstasy, Ice, CAT, and Redneck Cocaine. In the last chapter, Jenkins leaves us with a troubling and fatalistic conclusion. He writes, “As neurochemistry and chemical technologies advance, the stage is set for persistent confrontations between an entrenched anti-drug bureaucracy and the demonized phantom chemists, the evil scientific masterminds. The outcome, in short, will be recurrent synthetic panics” (p. 197).

In the end, this book is about the public hysteria about the illicit use and manufacture of chemical substances and the symbolic crusades that were nourished by the moral panics that were constructed in response to that hysteria. That being the case, Jenkins needs to do two things for his readers. First, he needs to make sure that we understand and appreciate the social processes by which drugs have come to serve as an appropriate if not propitious object around which to construct the hysteria that is needed to arouse a moral panic. He tries to do this when he writes, “The idea that drugs can reduce users to primitive savagery is inextricably bound up with the racial fears that have always been so critical an element of America’s drug scares” (p. 11). That’s true, but it’s more complicated than that. Since the symbolic value of drugs as a particularly valuable object of moral scorn underlies the specific argument of the book concerning the public response to synthetic drugs, more on the symbolic value of drugs would have been helpful.

Second, because his focus is specifically on synthetic or designer drugs, Jenkins needs to convince us that there is something uniquely interesting about such drugs that makes them particularly well-suited to the construction of moral panic. Related to this second concern, he needs to explain clearly how and why some drugs are called synthetic while other are not. Starting on page 5 he writes, “[Synthetic drugs] terrify precisely because they are manufactured by scientific processes, thus drawing on fears concerning the fearsome potential of unchecked experiment.” That’s an interesting explanation, and as he writes on page 7, it does indicate why “synthetic chemicals arouse deep-seated fears concerning the power of science and technology to reshape human nature and subvert or corrupt humanity in a well-intentioned quest for social betterment.” What it does not do is clarify for the reader how the process by which heroin was produced by Bayer is any less scientific than the process by which MDMA was produced by Merck.

The book is interesting more for the stories it tells than for the explanations it provides. The social constructionist argument relative to drugs has been
expounded as well if not better in the past, notably by Jenkins, and the argument that synthetic drug panics are uniquely interesting or important is not particularly convincing. Nonetheless, the stories about synthetic drug panics and the symbolic crusades they stimulated are fascinating, and not many people could tell them better than Philip Jenkins.

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References


Review of *When push comes to shove: A routine conflict approach to violence*

Authors: Leslie W. Kennedy and David R. Forde  
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Year: 1999

Since the introduction of routine activities theory two decades ago (Cohen and Felson, 1979), this approach to the understanding of criminal activity has gained increasing attention and empirical support. At its head, this is a theory not about criminals but about crimes. It assumes a motivated offender and suggests that a crime will occur when the opportunity presents itself, that is, when the offender comes into contact with a potential victim in the absence of a capable guardian. Thus it provides predictions as to when or where a crime will occur (with the coincidence of these three elements) or at what times (or in what eras) crime rates will be higher. Other, more qualitative, approaches that also stress the interactional structure of the criminal event—not simply the characteristics of the participants—draw upon a phenomenological understanding of the situation, calling attention to its transactional nature (see for example Goffman, 1959, 1974; Katz, 1988; Luckenbill and Doyle, 1989; Sacco and Kennedy, 1996). In their book, *When push comes to shove: A routine conflict approach to violence*, Kennedy and Forde (1999) attempt to explain everyday conflict, and the violence that may result from it, by integrating the phenomenological approach to conflict with elements of routine activities theory.

More specifically, instead of focusing on the traits of the motivated offender and the potential victim, Kennedy and Forde focus their attention on how conflict may become routinized and, especially, how the characteristics of a conflict situation can influence the outcome. That is, despite the individual attributes and the behavioral repertoire of the participants, the structure of the situation—such as the location or the presence of a third party—is likely to play the most important role in the outcome of the event (violence, non-violence, and/or resolution). The authors suggest that in these situations “meaning is created through the active participation of all parties…[and that] interactions take on additional meaning as a result of the ways in which individuals react to others and the situation” (p. 127). Over time, say Kennedy and Forde, we all experience these conflict situations and we learn to routinize our behavior based upon what has worked (or failed) in the past, building contingency plans for how we will act in a given situation. But these plans can change, of course, depending upon the unique qualities of each conflict situation. Thus, according to the authors, our understanding of violence should be based on our knowledge about daily low-intensity conflicts and the routines we employ to navigate them.

To this end, Kennedy and Forde’s book takes the following form. The first chapter discusses “violence in everyday life,” introducing the reader to the authors’ routine conflict theory and the approaches from which it draws: social construction, the criminal event perspective, and social interactionist theory. The second chapter presents two major theories of aggression, social learning and low self-control, and the authors employ criticisms of these perspectives—mainly that they are offender- and not event-based—as an argument for their routine conflict theory, which is grounded in routinized behavior and in the situational context of each event. In chapter 3, Kennedy and Forde examine more closely what they consider to be the three aspects of violence: social
construction, coercion, and the social event, while paying close attention to the cultural construction of normative behavior and the episodic nature of criminal events. This chapter is also where the authors come closest to stating their theory explicitly:

“We have combined the elements of construction, process, and content into a theory of routine conflict that suggests that individuals come into interactions with certain expectations that are formed by previous experiences, socialization, and the behavior of others. These expectations help determine whether or not individuals will see violence as an option in dealing with conflict or aggressive behavior. While this theory is grounded on a complex array of factors, its basic assumption is that choices are made based upon the constraints of situations and the repertoires learned by the protagonists in these and similar encounters” (p. 22).

Chapter 4 discusses the methodology employed (telephone surveys in Alberta and Manitoba, Canada) to evaluate the authors’ theory of routine conflict. This chapter also describes the construction of the survey and presents basic descriptive statistics of respondents’ experiences with conflict. The fifth chapter is wide-ranging. It further explains the methodology, especially the factorial survey design of the vignettes employed in order to gain information about respondents’ legitimization of violence in different situations, and also provides a description of what the authors believe to be the three stages of a violent event: “naming, claiming, and aggression,” which they borrow from the social organization literature and, as it relates to violence, from Luckenbill and Doyle (1989). In this chapter, the authors also construct models that estimate the effects of the features of the scenario, where it takes place, and the characteristics of those involved on each of these three stages. Chapter 6 employs data drawn from actual incidents in which respondents were involved in order to evaluate how situational factors—such as the respondent’s lifestyle, the location of the conflict, the presence and role of third parties, the relationship between the offender and victim, and the seriousness of the conflict—will influence the outcome of an event. The seventh chapter is a sidebar, of sorts. It is written by Stephen Baron and describes a field study of street youth conducted by Baron in order to test routine conflict theory and to compare the results from his sample with those of the general population sampled by Kennedy and Forde. In the final chapter, the authors summarize the elements of routine conflict theory, present their “prescriptions for restricting violent routines,” and suggest pathways for future research on the topic.

Given this summary of what the authors wish to present and of how it is presented, it is necessary to provide a somewhat unfriendly critique. To the point, the book is chaotic, lacking a clear path to follow from beginning to end. The ideas of the authors may certainly have merit, and the research design may provide support for their hypotheses, but the presentation of the material lacks clarity and does not allow the reader to make a decisive assessment of these issues.

For one, the authors repeatedly exchange their discussion of daily “conflict” situations with their theory of “routine violence,” though the vast majority of conflicts discussed by their respondents are minor and of low intensity. It might be the case that there are distinct qualitative differences between situations of low-intensity conflict and violence. The authors do suggest that this is precisely what they are trying to find—that is, the pathway that leads from these daily
low-level conflicts to violence—but beyond their suggestion that daily routines interact with the social context of the situation to create the outcome, this discussion is confusing.

A second issue is related to this confusion around the main issue of discussion. Routine activities theory assumes a motivated offender, making the event and/or opportunity the most important aspect of offending, and in this book Kennedy and Forde seek to elaborate upon the situational factors of the event as it mediates individual characteristics. But learning (in this case, the development of a behavioral repertoire—or routine—that either provides for the use of violence or does not) is clearly key to their theory, suggesting an etiology of offending. This means that the characteristics of offenders do indeed play an important role in the outcome of an event, even if tempered by situational characteristics. The authors are correct, I believe, in their suggestion that both learning and situational context interact to create a final outcome. However, a more careful consideration and discussion of these issues is required in order to contend with the oppositional assumptions of the two theories and in order to more clearly explain how they interact.

Next, much of the confusion of these first two issues could be avoided with a clear specification of the model the authors wish to test. Unfortunately, a model is never truly specified, leading to confusion for the authors and the reader throughout the rest of the book. There is actually a section entitled “Specifying a theory of routine conflict,” but it is not exactly consistent with what is said throughout the essay and, in fact, it does not clearly specify a theoretical model to be tested. This lack of specification is both indicative of the chaotic presentation of the material and a main cause of the lack of clarity throughout the rest of the book. Further, even though the theory is not clearly specified for the reader, a model is tested and Kennedy and Forde suggest that the results support their theory. It seems to me that the evidence might, in fact, support the authors’ contentions, but it is not clear given the exposition.

From my reading of the book, and the statement of theory quoted above, I believe that Kennedy and Forde’s model of routine conflict may look something like this:

![Diagram of the model](image)

According to the authors, the result of daily socialization, such as past experiences and the past behavior of others, results in the development of a routine, or behavioral repertoire, within the individual. One of the most important individual characteristics, say the authors, is whether or not socialization has increased the likelihood that violence is a legitimate option in a conflict situation. This individual characteristic interacts with the situational factors of the conflict situation, such as its location and the presence and the roles of third parties, to create the final outcome of the event. The outcome of
the event is one of either violence or non-violence, and may also include the potential for future conflict if the point of contention is not resolved.

The implications of a model such as this are important to the field of criminology. It moves our understanding of crime forward by potentially integrating two theories with differing assumptions and by revealing how elements from each can interact and result in a criminal offense. This is made all the more critical because we do not have here simply different theoretical elements, but different aspects of crime—antecedents to the event and the phenomenological nature of the event itself—which are often difficult for criminologists to reconcile. So, Kennedy and Forde have potentially enlightening ideas and a research methodology that may provide evidence for these hypotheses. In this particular book, however, this fascinating topic is held in check by a chaotic presentation. The reader is left with a glimpse of the potential of the authors’ work, but disappointed with the disorganized construction of the book.

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References


