



Citing the viewer : ethnography, film theory and experiences of martial arts action cinema.

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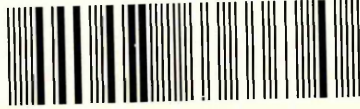
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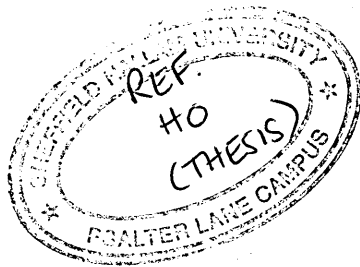
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**CITING THE VIEWER:
ETHNOGRAPHY, FILM THEORY
& EXPERIENCES OF
MARTIAL ARTS ACTION CINEMA**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement of
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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues for incorporating a radically increased awareness and understanding of the experiences and opinions of people who actually watch films into any film theory or criticism genuinely concerned to analyse, evaluate or otherwise interpret films and/or those who watch them. In particular, it suggests there is a need to re-think the status of film experiencers as informants who are *participant in* rather than objects of study, and that an ethnographic approach should be taken to narrow the gap between film studies and film experiencers.

Initially, I investigate ways in which film “viewers” and “audiences” have been and continue to be theorized, analyzed and represented, with emphases both on how film theory and criticism have treated film experiencers, and on the impact of the recent “ethnographic turn” in film and cultural studies. I then investigate pertinent ethnographic theories and methods in the context of recent debates about knowledge production and reflexivity, looking particularly at postmodern and anti-patriarchal critiques. I also consider the relationship between ethnography and cultural studies, and how both these areas impact on the study of film experiencers.

Ultimately I suggest particular ways in which ethnographic theories and methods might be used in film studies to inform investigations, understandings and therefore representations of film experiencers. I outline and consider how my case study uses such approaches before setting out the case study itself.

The case study sets out what sixty-seven participant-informants had to say and write about martial arts action films, and is in large part intended to “give voice” to film experiencers. But while the emphasis is on citing participant-informants’ own words, I recognize that there is no description without interpretation and reflect on this in the conclusions I draw from the case study “data” and my theoretical work.

PREFACE

The origins of this research project lie in my watching *Cyborg* and *Universal Soldier* when researching my undergraduate philosophy dissertation at Aberdeen University. My topic was mind, body and gender in cyborg cinema, and while neither *Cyborg* nor *Universal Soldier* had much to say about cyborgs, watching them both revived my early interest in watching martial arts (in “Monkey,” Bruce Lee films and “Hong Kong Phooey”), and revealed a great deal to me about the portrayal of martial arts and artists in action cinema.

When I moved to Iowa City to study film, my interest in martial arts and other action films grew – helped considerably by the staff of my local movie rental store who allowed me unlimited access to every video in the store. Six months into my time at Iowa, I did some work on stardom, and ultimately chose to write a star study of Jean-Claude Van Damme – a martial arts film actor widely known enough to be considered a “star.” As part of the study I undertook some audience research; to this end I took classes in tae kwon do and kickboxing in the hope of heightening my chances of getting survey respondents.

Although I found the survey responses invaluable in many ways, I was not satisfied with the method and the somewhat restricted information it produced. I decided to learn far more about qualitative research methods and audience work, and also started thinking that martial arts film watchers might prove an interesting group of “viewers” to investigate. I also continued to practice tae kwon do after completing my MA at Iowa – primarily because I enjoyed it and the environment in which it was taught, rather than to ensure a supply of interview participants!

Having decided to focus my PhD research on martial arts action films, I stayed in Iowa City for six months longer and then went to Sheffield to carry out more research whilst continuing to develop ideas about how best to access and make sense of viewers’ opinions and attitudes about films. Towards the end of this time I returned to Iowa to take a class in ethnographic methods and to interview more participant-informants.

It is work in areas of ethnography and cultural studies that most influenced the way I approached my research materials when analysing them and writing up. As such, a considerable part of this thesis is concerned with the relationship between cultural studies and ethnography, in particular whether the study of film watchers can implement or otherwise benefit from ethnographic theories and methods.

But ultimately, whether or not my hypotheses about the ways in which “audience” research should be done are accepted or rejected, this project fulfils one key aim that may be identified as ethnographic: That is, it “gives voice” to a range of individual film watchers who are regularly dismissed *en masse* as part of a theoretical group of viewers who are “dumb” and/or who enjoy “violence” and not a lot else. My research provides evidence that people who watch martial arts films do so for a variety of reasons, with a variety of levels of critical awareness, and challenges assumptions about martial arts action film viewers made by other film viewers, cultural critics and theorists alike.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Those who deserve the greatest thanks from me are undoubtedly the sixty-seven people who gave their time and energy to participating in my research as informants through interviews, letter-writing or answering questionnaires in great detail. I am especially grateful to Hawkeye Tae Kwon Do members; to martial artists who took time out at tournaments to talk with me; to those readers of *Impact* who took the trouble to write to me; and to the staff of That's Rentertainment Downtown in Iowa City (without whom I'd never have seen so many martial arts action films in the first place!).

Other than that, my primary thanks go to the AHRB who gave me a three year full-time award to undertake my PhD research project, and stuck by that decision even when it underwent considerable changes early in my first year of study. Without the award I would certainly not have been able to complete my project in the time I did, and I am extremely grateful to the AHRB for their support.

I also thank my supervisor, Steve Neale, and other colleagues at Sheffield Hallam University – especially Richard Maltby (now at Flinders University). But I owe as much to colleagues at the University of Iowa: I would like to thank John Peters for his truly brilliant “Philosophy of Media” class in 1996, as well as for further inspiration and assistance; Kristine Fitch for her enjoyable and invaluable class on “Ethnographic Theories” in 1999; Steve Duck for his help and support; and the Rhetoric Department for providing such a productive and helpful environment in which to work. Last but not least I want to thank those friends and colleagues whose support has helped me and made me more resilient to the skepticism I encounter from people dubious about the value of work on martial arts action cinema and its watchers. A special thank you, then, to Martti Lahti, Leo Charney, Allison McCracken, Rob Latham, Michael Morris, Jane Garrett, Alun Jordan, Jonathan Rayner, Angela Martin, Richard Moore, and my parents, Liz and Julian Holland (even though *some* of you have never watched a martial arts action film in your life!).

CONTENTS

PART I: INTRODUCTIONS	1
Chapter 1: Setting the scene: Key contexts, aims & the case study	2
PART II: FRAMING THEORIES, METHODOLOGIES & DEBATES	33
Chapter 2: Theories of media experience and the “effects” tradition	34
Chapter 3: Ethnographic approaches to films and film experiencers	83
PART III: CASE STUDY	119
Chapter 4: Conducting, designing and writing up the research	120
Chapter 5: Informant experiences of martial arts action cinema	137
PART IV: FINAL HYPOTHESES & CONCLUSIONS	206
Chapter 6: Conclusions and hypotheses about martial arts action cinema, film experiencers, and film studies	207
WORKS CITED	231
Academic sources	231
Press and “popular” publications	241
Participant-informants	244
Selected filmography	247
APPENDIX A	249

PART I: INTRODUCTIONS

***‘Textual analysis has, unfortunately,
become alarmingly presumptuous’*** – Justin Lewis

***‘I have yet to meet any individual whose responses to the media
are articulated in ways that seem to fit the kinds of account theorists
give of ‘media impacts’***” – Martin Barker

CHAPTER 1: SETTING THE SCENE: KEY CONTEXTS, AIMS & THE CASE STUDY

My goal in this project is to argue for the value of incorporating a radically increased awareness and understanding of the experiences and opinions of people who actually watch films into any film theory or criticism genuinely concerned to analyze, evaluate or otherwise interpret films and those who watch them. Driven by the increased interest over recent years in the “reception” of films in film studies and in audience research more generally, I investigate the reasons behind such a move and address concerns raised therein by proposing approaches from ethnography and cultural studies be used to analyze films in addition to methods from within film theory itself. My discussion involves questioning the epistemological bases of current ways in which film theory and criticism tends to treat and theorize “the audience” as well as certain groups of films; I suggest that a more rigorous, inductive process of reasoning be used to counter the too often unsubstantiated claims made deductively about actual people still regularly theorized as “ideal spectators” – whether explicitly or implicitly - in and by many areas of film studies (and other areas of so-called audience research and reception studies). That is, I suggest more accurate and more productive conclusions can be drawn about the pleasures and meanings of films - and what wider significances and interest these might have for their watchers - if such conclusions are drawn from communicating with actual people rather than from assuming what “spectator,” “viewer” or “audience” motives, pleasures, identities and interpretations are from only textual analysis and its assumptions about both the “audience” and “effects” of mass media forms.

One key concern I want to address is the way in which film theorists engaged primarily in textual analysis tend to construct a “spectator” who exists only hypothetically and is therefore often quite at odds with actual film experiencers, rendering theorists’ hypotheses about both the meanings of films and the nature of their “spectators” decidedly problematic. This criticism is especially pertinent in the case of psychoanalytic theorists whose tendency is, as Jackie Stacey argues, to construct a spectator ‘in strong opposition to the so-called empirical spectator’ (22). To illustrate the veracity of this charge, Stacey cites feminist film theorists who display this tendency, writing:

Mary Anne Doane, for example, asserts:

I have never thought of the female spectator as synonymous with the woman sitting in front of the screen, munching her popcorn. ...It is a concept which is totally foreign to the epistemological framework of the new ethnographic analysis of audiences... The female spectator is a concept, not a person.

(Doane, 1989b: 142)

Similarly, Guilian Bruno states:

I am not interested in an empirical analysis of the phenomenon of female spectatorship. ...I cannot get over an old semiotic diffidence for any notion of empirical 'truth' or 'reality', which I find very problematic. There are ways in which for me the phantasmatic level is more real than reality itself, or the so-called reality of facts.

(Bruno, 1989: 106).¹

Stacey continues by pointing out that such dismissals 'of how women in the audience watch films' as 'uninteresting or irrelevant to debates about female spectatorship' suggests 'a rather troubling division between film theory and cinema audiences' (23). It is this 'troubling division' that I hope at least in part to address in this project.

Doane, Bruno and others display a skepticism about studying or consulting film watchers that stems from the apparent belief that 'any study which involves people who attend cinemas must necessarily fall into the negative traps of empiricism' (Stacey 23),. As a result, a central aim of this project is to contribute to attempts such as Stacey's to show that work with film watchers need not necessarily fall into such traps, and that incorporating an awareness of actual film watchers into theory need neither involve empirical claims about 'truth' or 'reality' *nor* contradict semiotic ideals. Indeed, as Justin Lewis argues so vehemently², it is perhaps the stridently text-centred theorists rather than those interested also in the "audience" who do semiotics an injustice.

It is not only film theorists who pose problems vis-à-vis the treatment of films and those who watch them, however; many film critics also hypothesize about "viewers" and "audience members" who may as well be termed "spectators" for all the relation they bear to actual people who watch films. Indeed, it might be argued that film critics are still more guilty than film theorists of making unfounded and problematic assumptions about films and their watchers. Many critics are quite unlike theorists in that they do not claim to be referring to theoretical constructs when they speak or write about the "viewer" or "audience member," but make claims about how *actual* film watchers

¹ Stacey 22-23

² This is an argument to which I refer more fully below.

experience, interpret and enjoy films. Others gloss over the problem of making assumptions without research or evidence by simply asserting that they are presenting their own view and as such do not impute anything about those who watch the films in question. Such claims, though, are at best disingenuous. After all, as Martin Barker and Kate Brooks argue, 'they *are* simultaneously ascribing cultural significance to the films, presenting their own 'readings' as more than personal, and on the back of these imputing consequences to a vast 'other': the mass of people who went to see these films' (1998a: 8). Again, the issue in film criticism as in film theory is twofold (at least). First, theorists and critics make epistemologically weak assertions about films and/or their watchers based on assumption and hypothesis rather than on evidence. Second, and as a result of this, theorists and critics often produce epistemologically weak "readings" of films, since they are so often based on unfounded assumptions about the nature, pleasures and interpretations of film experiences, and on partial or simply inaccurate assumptions about the identities, pleasures and interpretations of people who watch the films under analysis and evaluation.

To reiterate, it is the problematic gap between theory and who and what is theorized, and between criticism and who and what is criticized, that is at the heart of my concerns in this project. While I elaborate further on the nature and problems of this gap in Chapter 2, I now establish some context for the problems I identify. I then outline why my response to such problems focuses on interviewing and otherwise citing film watchers; why I look to ethnographic theory and practice to this end; and why I choose to focus on martial arts action cinema as a case study.

FILM STUDIES AND "THE AUDIENCE"

People who watch and otherwise experience films are of course not the only, or even primary, subjects of study in the disciplinary field termed film studies. Individuals who work to produce films (actors, directors, editors and so on) have been studied by many, as have the various socio-cultural, economic and political contexts in which films are conceptualized, produced, publicized, released and received. In addition, there exist histories of technological developments and trends in filmmaking, studies of stylistic and formal qualities of films, and so forth. Some of these areas deal with "the audience,"³ while others are explicitly not concerned with the "audience" of films.

³ Studies of censorship, for example, might regularly refer to ways in which audience members are perceived and/or presumed to be influenced by what they see.

Overall, though, as Richard Maltby argues with regard to Hollywood in particular, '[u]ntil recently, critical study... has taken little interest in movie audiences, concentrating its attention on the relatively abstract entity of the 'film-as-text' (1999b: 4).

Arguably, all branches of film studies are affected by ways in which "the viewer" is so regularly conceptualized as a passive consumer (but simultaneously as an active threat by virtue of that very passivity) - but dealing with every aspect of film studies is beyond the scope of this project. My concerns here revolve primarily around ways in which film theorists study and conceptualize film watchers where those ways are expressed in, or as, spectatorship and reception studies. I am also concerned with ways in which film critics characterize film watchers, and how this affects their evaluations of films, and *vice versa*. Ultimately, my aim is to suggest ways in which these approaches might be improved or even replaced by ethnographically-influenced approaches to studying, understanding and conceptualizing the actual individuals who watch, listen to and otherwise experience the cinema.

FILM THEORY, FILM CRITICISM AND RECEPTION STUDIES

It is theories of spectatorship (and the theories of textual analysis that underpin them) that take the film watcher as a central subject of analysis, working from analysis of textual properties to formulate and theorize "spectator positions" from which they presume people watch – or are "structured" to watch - films. And, whether or not all areas of film studies are explicitly concerned with film watchers, it is surely the case that '[t]heoretical definitions of cinema spectatorship have been at the heart of film studies for much of the last three decades' (Maltby 2000: 1).

In the introduction to the third volume of collected articles about Hollywood audiences edited by Melvyn Stokes and Maltby, *Hollywood Spectatorship: Changing Perceptions of Cinema Audiences* (2000), Maltby outlines the theoretical roots of film studies's focus on the text, noting how as it emerged as a discipline 'the distrust of empirical studies of movie reception was deeply engrained, reflecting both the theoretical orientation of the field in general and an awareness among many American film scholars of the history of audience research of this kind and the uses made of such research' (3). In the next chapter, I look more thoroughly at the implications of film theory and criticism's distrust of so-called empirical studies, but also at how a growing number of film theorists have tried to open up research on and uses of "audiences"

and “reception” in a range of ways – many most recent instances of which are in Stokes and Maltby’s three edited collections of work on Hollywood audiences.

Film theorists did not wait until the 1990s to challenge the text-centred nature of their discipline, though. Paul Willeman (1978) and Steve Neale (1977) pointed to problems of assuming “viewers” can be accurately and appropriately accessed via the text in the late 1970s; while Richard Dyer has since 1979 called for film theorists to take note of actual film watchers when analyzing films and their stars. Following on from this, in 1984 Annette Kuhn suggested rethinking the relationship between textually-constructed female spectators and “real” female film watchers, and 1985 saw the publication of Jacqueline Bobo’s ‘ethnographic investigation into how black female spectators reacted to *The Color Purple*’ (Maltby 2000: 6) and Valerie Walkerdine’s analysis of not only a working class family’s viewing of *Rocky* but of the analyst’s position vis-à-vis the family and their experiences. The following year Barbara Klinger completed a PhD thesis entitled “Cinema & Social Process: a contextual theory of the cinema and its spectators,” and in 1989 published her article, “Digressions at the cinema,” which calls for film studies to attend more and more seriously to ways in which films are watched and experienced by movie-goers. In the same year Miriam Hansen proposed that spectatorship ‘should be thought of as a mediation between the theoretical spectator and his/her real counterpart’ (Maltby 2000: 4), and Helen Tyler published her ‘work on British and American fans of *Gone with the Wind*’ (ibid. 6). The 1980s, then, saw the emergence of distinct challenges to film theory’s text-centrism, and showed evidence of cross-fertilization between film studies and cultural studies for a number of theorists – especially feminist theorists.

The early 1990s saw the publication of Janet Staiger’s *Interpreting Films* (1992) and Jackie Stacey’s *Star Gazing* (1994) – both important texts in the continued development of reception theory and practice – and the latter half of the decade has seen a number of what might be termed ‘ethnographic investigations’ (Maltby 2000: 6) of film viewers (Austin, Barker and Brooks, Cherry, Hill, and others). These studies have been termed “reception studies” because they are, as Staiger puts it, interested in what *actually* happens ‘in the material world’ – and because while their authors might speculate why what happens happens (and why it does not happen differently), they do *not* ‘attempt to construct a generalized, systematic explanation of how individuals might have comprehended texts, and possibly someday will, but rather how they actually understood them’ (Staiger 8).

As such, reception studies are defined by Staiger and others as precisely *not* textual interpretation, but rather as attempts 'to understand textual interpretations as they are produced historically,' and thus as trying 'to explain an event (the interpretation of a film)' rather than 'elucidating an object (the film)' (Staiger 9). Despite this distinction, Staiger emphasizes that '[e]ven if reception studies is not textual analysis, it has a use-value for that' (11) - especially given that 'many interpretations of texts operate from questionable assumptions about spectators and what they do' (11-12). Indeed it is this aspect of reception studies interests me the most, since it seems to address problems and gaps evident in much of film theory and criticism's treatment of films and their watchers. It seems to me that a grasp of what *actually* happens when films are experienced by people is *essential* to theorists and critics producing pertinent and useful analyses and interpretations of films, and that so-called empirical audience research is the only effective way in which theorists and critics can move away from the plethora of 'questionable assumptions' they make about film watchers that underlie so many theories about as well as reviews, evaluations and interpretations of films. This is the key reason film theory needs to both listen to and cite those who watch films, and film criticism needs similarly to reconsider some of the bases on which it evaluates films and those who watch them.

WHY CITE THE VIEWER?

The increasing concern with discovering and studying what viewers think about and bring to films and their intertexts is part of more wide-ranging twentieth century challenges to the possibility of objective knowledge and the validity of the positivist world view. At the core of this state of affairs lies an increased sensitivity to the complexities and epistemological significance of different social identities and individuals and the variety of perspectives engendered by them. Resulting concerns to include a wide range of "voices" in academic analyses, and to replace the discredited positivist world-view with a multiperspectival one have been apparent in many branches of contemporary thought (but remain absent in many others). These concerns have great significance for film theory and criticism, primarily because they mean the status of meaning producer can no longer be unthinkingly accorded just to the few professionals who write, direct, produce and analyze films, or even just to generalized social and cultural contexts of production and reception. Instead, doors are being opened to acknowledge people (who go to the cinema, rent videos and watch films on television, as well as use other media forms) as the individual meaning producers that they are - and have always been. Even when individual "viewers" are

not consulted directly (about every aspect of interest to film theorists), recent shifts in attitude toward them as meaning-producers mean that “viewer” heterogeneity is at least acknowledged in many film analyses, and some attempts are made to theorize its significance. This in itself goes a long way to exploding the hegemony of the singular and often stereotypical “ideal spectator” predominant not only in so much film analysis but also, implicitly, in the work of film critics and other mass media researchers and commentators.

In Part II, I set out a range of key ways in which both “audience” studies and ethnography have been impacted by recent and ongoing shifts in thinking about knowledge, its production and reflexivity about epistemological processes and assumptions. Chapter 2 focuses on how individual and groups of audience members have been and continue to be investigated and theorized, with an emphasis on how film theory and criticism has treated film watchers and on the impact of the so-called “ethnographic turn.” Chapter 3 then places ethnography in the context of recent debates around ideas of knowledge production, objectivity and reflexivity, looking especially at so-called “postmodern” critiques and, in turn, critiques from feminist and other anti-patriarchal thinkers. Chapter 3 also points up some telling parallels between contemporary debates and concerns in ethnography and in audience and reception studies, focusing on how these parallels affect the ways in which film studies and ethnography might interact. Having set out such key areas of history and debate, I finish Chapter 3 by suggesting ways in which ethnographic theories and methods might be used by film theorists and might affect their and film critics’ characterization and understanding of film watchers; I close Part II with an outline of how my case study utilizes such approaches, and discuss these approaches vis-à-vis my own particular case study in Part III.

In setting out my case study in Part III I very deliberately reject the notion that theoretical debate about “the audience” and ways to approach audience research can take the place of actual research. Many theorists still shy away from reporting and analyzing “what the audience thinks,” and there are a number of reasons for this. Of course many theorists retain the belief that the meanings and significance of films can be grasped by textual (perhaps combined with some contextual) analysis; but I suspect many others fear the theoretical nightmare that ‘[e]stablishing connections between attitudes and perceptions is technically difficult and demanding’ (Jhally & Lewis 9), and the complexity of the associated problem that all texts need to be placed ‘in the context of a more general argument about representation and reality’ (Jhally &

Lewis 7), as well as the practical and logistical nightmare of designing, carrying out and writing up work with film watchers.

Especially in his work on stars, Dyer provides compelling arguments for more audience studies to be carried out. However, despite his concerns that the neglect of audience and star studies within film studies makes it hard to recognize the extent to which 'what we are analyzing gains its force and intensity from the way it is experienced, and ... ideology shapes the experiential and affective as much as the cognitive' (Dyer 1979: 182), the size and complexity of the problems of audience research seem *still* to discourage most film theorists from addressing them. Star studies and reception studies *still* tend to be relegated to the margins (look at a range of film studies journals from the last decade or two if you need convincing), and the discipline as a whole regularly fails to take seriously the ways in which films are experienced, with many film theorists still rejecting the analysis of actual watcher responses which are incommensurable with 'any notion of the "ideal" spectatorship' which continues to inform approaches to theorizing "the audience" in film studies (Klinger 118). Unfortunately, Stacey makes a convincing claim when she writes that '[i]n film theory, any engagement with audiences has been dismissed as crudely or naively empiricist, and in film history there have been few ethnographic analyses of audiences, but rather studies of the institutional reception of films, or quantitative studies of cinema studies in the past' (75). In contrast, reception and star studies seem not only more willing to take on a wider range of materials for analysis, but also acknowledge that homogenizing conclusions are not only hard to come by, but are not anyway desirable because they miss so much. It remains unclear whether film theorists fail to undertake these types of studies because they reject their theoretical and/or methodological bases, or because they wish to avoid taking on the collection and analysis of the huge range of materials such studies require.

However, the range of recent work that shows fruitful ways of taking on precisely such challenges suggests that reasons of complexity and difficulty are, while understandably off-putting, not adequate to defer such work indefinitely. More importantly, I hold that the conclusions drawn in such studies that challenge long-held assumptions about audience-media relations dictates that more such work *should* be carried out in the interests of dislodging such assumptions. Studies such as those by Janice Radway, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, Thomas Austin, and Barker and Brooks illustrate quite emphatically that eliciting responses from people who actually experience media forms can *and does* radically alter key assumptions and conclusions

made about the ways that texts are experienced and the “effects” they produce (indeed such research also questions whether texts can be said to *have* “effects” at all); this in itself is a strong argument to *do* more work on reception rather than continue only to theorize ways in which it might (or might not) be done.

THEORY, CRITICISM, AND/AS RECEPTION

In this context, I should like to highlight a point that provides a key motivating force for my choice of research topic: It seems clear to me that film theory and criticism has *always* been an articulation of reception – as has much of what constitutes media studies, literary studies and much of cultural studies as well as television criticism. The problem is not this in itself, but rather the limits placed on whose reception (experiences, opinions, responses, and so on) has been articulated, and how the necessarily personal, partial and perspectival nature of that work has been treated. On the one hand, many theorists and critics do claim to speak for, or rather of, “the audience” when they write for instance about how a particular film places or constructs “its” watchers, or about how it is received by a certain “type” or “group” of watcher/s. Alternatively, criticisms of partiality are deflected precisely by celebrating and defending that partiality and the right to articulate it as individuals. Here, though, Barker and Brooks’s above-cited argument that critics and theorists *aren’t* just writing personal responses (since ‘they are simultaneously ascribing cultural significance to the films’ (1998a: 8)) is of key importance.

For a variety of reasons to do with political, economic and socio-cultural power, film theory and criticism tends to articulate directly the views of only a small number of “professional” academics, while the mass media delimits the views expressed about its products to a small number of paid professionals who produce or review them. Thus the motive for bringing “the audience” into the equation is not only to elicit a wider range of views about texts, but to include a range of views from people whose views have less *power* – or less cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu) - than those most often presented. This concern is central in differentiating the approach of film theory and criticism to studying films and watchers from the one advocated by market researchers. It is thus essential to consider not only the way in which we theorize watchers, but also how we arrive at that position and whether our research methods and analyses reflect those processes accurately.

We might assume that film theorists and critics are not interested in defining watchers as market segments (other than as a category to be explored and exploded), but are

concerned rather with their status as sites of acculturation and as social process. But a review of much of work that constitutes film theory and criticism reveals a remarkable range of sweeping assumptions and generalizations made about film watchers – assumptions and generalizations remarkably similar to those made by market researchers (for example, the assumption that action film viewers are mainly men who might be of low intelligence, enjoy violence and hold right-wing views about gender, race and national identity amongst other things). Critics are often shameless about such characterizations – characterizations outlined by Annette Hill at the start of her study of “viewers:”

As far back as 1925, Professor Cyril Burt was labeling people who like to watch ‘crook films’ as ‘defective’, and in 1992 Michael Medved described those people who like to watch violent movies as ‘drooling, hormone-addled, violence prone sub-literate adolescent males’. It is this image of the moviegoer that is prevalent not just in the media but in certain political, academic and research circles (3).

In contrast, theorists can be far more underhand. Barbara Creed, for instance, references Elizabeth Cowie’s (1984) arguments about the fluidity of spectator identification, and herself argues that it is ‘most likely that identificatory processes are extremely fluid and allow the spectator to switch identification’ (Creed 155). However, Creed consistently assumes that identification does take place *and* that it depends in large part ‘on the power of the various filmic codes (subjective camera, close-up images, music) designed to encourage certain modes of identification above others’ (ibid). In addition, and again despite her references to the fluidity of “identification,” she regularly distinguishes unproblematically between “male” and “female” spectators, stating for example that ‘in those films where the male is the victim of the monstrous-feminine..... the male spectator, *who identifies with his screen surrogate*, is clearly placed in a powerless situation’ (154-155, my italics).

The state of affairs illustrated by the treatment not only of martial arts action films but also those who watch them stems directly from the license allowed film theorists and critics to make assumptions about film watchers, where such license in turn stems from models of “ideal spectatorship” that provoke the concern to theorize actual watchers in the first place – and also from the legacy of the “effects” tradition that arguably underpins such notions as well as many others in less text-focused audience studies (as I argue in Chapter 2). One problem evident with such license in film theory and criticism is that assumptions about a film’s pleasures and meanings are made before they are adequately investigated (or investigated at all), thus denying that ‘it *is* worth attempting to give an account, rather than an ‘explanation,’ of both the pleasures

and the political significance' of films (Tasker 5, my emphasis). This tendency to be complicit in their "author's" explanation rather than providing an account of a film's meanings for those who watch it renders models of analysis relying on any notion of "spectatorship" highly suspect.

A closely related reason to "cite the viewer" rather than the "spectator" in film and other cultural studies is set out by Lewis in his 1991 study of television, *The Ideological Octopus*. He too is exasperated by the ways in which textual analysis has been used – or misused, in his opinion – in theorizing both "audiences" and "meanings."

Asserting first that 'at its best, textual analysis has been liberating, opening up the dark and secret mechanisms of messages' (1991: 33), Lewis argues that still the 'tendency to overindulge in textual exploration has produced a number of harmful side effects' (1991: 37). His principle criticism here is that the necessarily speculative nature of semiological exploration has not been acknowledged, so that in reality '[t]extual analysis has, unfortunately, become alarmingly presumptuous' (Lewis 1991: 34).

Having adumbrated this as the context in which so much contemporary work on media takes place, Lewis makes his key point that actual textual work has in fact 'distort[ed] the semiological endeavour, to show not what the text *could* mean, but to assert what it *does* mean' (34); that somewhere along the line we lost sight of the fact that in semiology's own terms 'to unravel meaning we need to explore not only the signifier (the message), but the level of the signified (the audience)' (34).

In essence, Lewis argues that despite recognitions that '[r]eal readers are subjects in history, living in social formations, rather than mere subjects of a single text' (Willeman 1978: 48; cited Lewis 1991: 34), the 'radical semiological point' that 'signs do not come prepackaged; they are produced by the engagement of people with things' (1991: 35) is still regularly missed or elided. Lewis therefore claims semiology is 'impoverished,' and calls for media theorists and critics to stop asserting what texts mean and instead investigate what and how they *could* mean based on evidence gleaned from actual audience study and understanding. Lewis's points are important to my project about film because they provide an argument not only for film theory to study film watchers, but to see this as an integral and necessary aspect of any semiological project; this underscores my point that film watchers need to be studied or consulted not only in the interests of understanding the "audience," but more importantly in the interests of understanding the "text."

WHY MARTIAL ARTS ACTION CINEMA?

I have a number of reasons for choosing this area of cinema to study. First, martial arts action films in particular – and many action films more generally – are frequently attacked and/or ridiculed by the press, critics and academics alike for their perceived lack of plot, lack of originality, lack of technical and acting sophistication, and their “violence” which is regularly referred to as “gratuitous,” “senseless,” or even “celebratory.” Accordingly, people who watch and enjoy martial arts action films are equally frequently attacked and/or ridiculed by the same people, who (in the “effects” tradition, whether explicitly or not) equate “violent” and “dumb” films with “violent” and “dumb” viewers (cf. Holmlund, Tasker). As such, the study of martial arts films in the contexts of how and why they are watched, enjoyed and otherwise experienced provides an opportunity to consider the assumptions about “effects” which pervade so much film theory and criticism (as well as “audience” work more generally). Additionally, such a study adds to largely feminist projects to “rescue’ the denigrated media forms’ (Moore 7), where this project can at least in part be considered to add martial arts action films to the genres of soap opera, romantic fiction and horror films that other ‘feminist media theorists and audience researchers’ have worked to save from ‘outright critical dismissal’ (Moore 38).

The fact that martial arts action cinema is most often associated with male film experiencers does not render my project irrelevant to the feminist project, especially if that project is broadly conceptualized as being anti-patriarchal in nature (thus involving not only anti sexist work but also anti heterosexist, ageist, racist and other work). In fact, I would suggest that the similar ways in which experiencers of martial arts films and those of soaps, romances and horror are treated by many critics and theorists points to precisely the reasons that such projects are interlinked. In all cases the “dumb,” unsophisticated genres and experiencers characterized as such are genres and experiencers in places of less power, and holders of less cultural capital, than those elevated by patriarchy. Soaps and romances are associated with experiencers regarded as holding less cultural capital by virtue of their gender, for instance, while martial arts films are often associated with experiencers regarded as holding less cultural capital by virtue of their class and often age and/or race. Indeed, just as there was until recently virtually no work that focuses on “feminine” pleasures and reading competences associated with “feminine” genres, there is still at least as little attention

given to the reading pleasures of young, working-class men.⁴ While my study challenges the very notion that martial arts action films *are* experienced primarily by such a narrowly-defined group in the first place, it also provides the opportunity to give sustained attention to those who do experience these films – including young, often working-class men.

In relation to this, I agree with Lynne Joyrich that '[w]hile the material conditions linking femininity and consumerism are ... historically determined, the discursive connections are mutually sustaining' (40); in this context I chose to consider a set of texts almost invariably associated with male (and indeed masculine) viewers. I do this in an attempt to reveal the extent to which although "reception" is so often figured 'as a feminine "occupation"' – which indicates perhaps why so much reception work has been focused on the "feminine" genres of the soap opera and the romance novel? – it is, as Joyrich points out, 'nonetheless colonized by and for men' (9).

Finally, I chose martial arts action cinema because I believe it provides a particularly interesting context in which to consider film experiencers who do *not* watch the films in question – those who in this case reject the films as too "violent" or "dumb" to watch, as well as those who are just not interested in them. I was particularly interested in accessing and understanding the experiences of such participants given my suspicion that many film theorists and critics who theorize, caricature, dismiss or otherwise refer to martial arts action cinema and its "audience" base their claims on limited experiences of actually watching the films – let alone interacting with the film experiencers – about which they write. Importantly, then, my project opens up the question of exactly who watches films that are widely denigrated in and by the press and academia.

WHAT IS MARTIAL ARTS ACTION CINEMA?

Before continuing to explain and outline my case study I present of it in this project, I want to clarify to which films and stars the label "martial arts action cinema" might be applied. In general, the term "martial arts action cinema" refers to films that focus on representing martial arts fights and/or techniques (and that revolve their narratives around such a display), and to the stars of these films who are usually highly skilled in martial arts. This project is concerned primarily with Hollywood martial arts action

⁴ Generally, in fact, while there is now plenty work on theorizing "masculinity," 'there is still very little work in reception studies which has given sustained critical attention to masculine reading pleasures and competencies' as masculine (Moore 49). Austin's work is the only notable – and extremely welcome – exception to this.

films, but also refers to the Hong Kong and Chinese martial arts films that are available to Western film experiencers (usually only on video). I refer also to Hong Kong and Chinese films first because they are seen by most people to have inspired Hollywood's use of martial arts in its own films, and also because many informants talk or write about them. In addition, I make some reference to action films that include martial arts sequences even though they are not concerned with martial arts *per se*; this is primarily because informants talk about these films, especially in the context of how martial arts are represented in and by Hollywood.

The sub-genre of Hollywood martial arts action films usually involves protagonists and other characters played by actors chosen as much for their martial arts prowess as for their more traditional acting skills, and often involve a plot that revolves around the notion of training, fighting and/or seeking to avenge the death or mistreatment of a loved one (cf. *The Most Dangerous Game*). Core films of the sub-genre include *Bloodsport*, which stars Jean-Claude Van Damme and tells the "true" story of Frank Dux, the first Westerner to win the Thai Kumite title; *The Perfect Weapon*, which stars Jeff Speakman as a kenpo karate master avenging the murder of his mentor; *Under Siege* which stars Steven Seagal as an ex Navy SEAL who saves the crew of a hijacked warship; *Best of the Best* which tells the story of the US karate team's training to fight the Korean team; *American Ninja* which stars Michael Dudikoff and David Bradley as quarreling brothers; *China O'Brien* which stars Cynthia Rothrock as a woman avenging her father's murder; and Jackie Chan's US films including *Police Story III: Supercop* which co-stars Michelle Yeoh. Films such as *The Karate Kid*, *Kickboxer* and Chuck Norris's *Delta Force* series are also well known martial arts action films, and other stars – such as Lorenzo Lamas, Mark Dacascos, Karen Sheperd and Stacie Randall - are familiar to fans of the genre, if not to other film experiencers.

In addition, many Hollywood martial arts film watchers are also familiar with and/or fans of a number of Hong Kong and Chinese, as well as some Japanese martial arts films (primarily those starring Sonny Chiba – especially *The Street Fighter*). Bruce Lee's films are perhaps the best known and most popular of this type, with *Enter the Dragon* as possibly the best known martial arts film. Jackie Chan's films – such as *Police Story* - are also well known to Western film experiencers, although most are more familiar with his Hollywood films, mentioned above; the same might be said of Jet Li. Few other Hong Kong or Chinese martial arts actors are recognized in the West, although a wide range of their films are available on video. Many film

experiencers less familiar with the genre might think of director John Woo's films such as *Hard Boiled* and *The Killer* as martial arts action films, as well as films starring Chow Yun Fat. However, most of these films have a lot of gun play and very little martial arts in them, and as such as more equivalent to mainstream Hollywood action films than to Hollywood martial arts films.⁵

When I refer to "martial arts action cinema" in this project, then, I am usually referring to both Hollywood and other martial arts action films, not to one or the other set of films or to more mainstream action films (that may or may not include martial arts sequences) from Hollywood and/or China or Hong Kong. Sometimes, however, I use the term differently if the informant about who I am writing uses it differently, and sometimes I specify if I am referring to a particular set of films with the label by prefacing it with either "US" or "Hong Kong and Chinese."

WHY NOT FOCUS ON ONE FILM OR STAR?

I decided to focus on a genre – or, rather, a sub-genre – rather than on an individual film or star, although it could be argued that the latter approach would give more coherence to my project (and would render it more easily accessible to those not familiar with the sub-genre of martial arts action films). To explain my decision to focus my research on a wider area, I need to tell part of the story of my research.

When I first proposed my PhD project to Steve Neale and Richard Maltby, they advised me that while the general plan was fine, I should not focus on several stars of the genre as I proposed, but should limit my research to one star in the interests of coherence and manageability. Since I had already completed a "star study" of Jean-Claude Van Damme as part of my MA thesis, we decided Van Damme would be the sensible choice– not only because I already had information on him, but also because of the reasons I chose him for that study (he is well known yet sub-genre specific; he has a comparatively wide fan base, etc.). For that reason I concentrated my first few months of research on watcher and non-watcher experiences of Van Damme. However, I soon found what I suspected I might in loosely-structured interviews about a single sub-genre star: People who wanted to talk about Van Damme, for the most part, also wanted to talk about other stars of the genre, and issues raised by films other than those in which Van Damme stars. (Also, apart from on a few star-specific

⁵ The assumption underlying confusion around John Woo, Chow Yun Fat and other Chinese and Hong Kong film directors and stars seems to be that any Chinese or Hong Kong action film necessarily involves martial arts. This is simply not the case – but it is indicative of Western stereotypes.

fan sites, most of the watcher-reviews of Van Damme's movies on the Internet - which I discuss briefly in this project – make reference to other stars and films in the genre and sub-genre.) Overall, I decided pretty quickly that while Van Damme might make a useful focus for my reader, he – or *any* single star – does *not* make a useful focus for a study committed to listening to and citing what actual film experiencers have to say. If I had insisted in maintaining the focus on one star, I believe I would have produced an interesting study; however, that study would have fallen into the trap of constituting an “audience” group defined by perimeters not appropriate to the individuals who participated in this research project.

PARTICIPANTS AND MODES OF PARTICIPATION

I used a range of methods to access opinions about and experiences of martial arts action cinema for two reasons. First, I wanted to access as wide a range of information as possible, and for that reason I felt that sticking only to people whom I could interview (or hand a questionnaire to) in person might be too limiting. So I decided to appeal to the readers of *Impact* magazine for letters, and to use the Internet as an additional source of information. Second, the purpose of this project is not simply to produce information and hypotheses about experiences of martial arts action cinema – it is also an inquiry into what ethnographic theories and methodologies might best serve a film studies interested in film watchers. For that reason I did not want to make *a priori* decisions about how to appropriate ethnographic methods or which methods to appropriate, but instead chose to investigate a few different ways in which ethnographic approaches might be used.

PRESENTING THE CASE STUDY

While Chapter 4 focuses on how the case study was set up and conducted, Chapter 5 contains my “findings” of what participant-informants say and write about martial arts action cinema. And while in Chapter 6 I identify three key “aspects of experience” expressed by informants, the “writing up” of their comments is structured not around these “findings,” but rather around questions and areas of discussion raised by the questions I asked and by informants themselves. In Chapter 5, then, my emphasis is on citing film watchers “in their own words,” and also in identifying similarities and differences of opinion and experience that emerge from their talk and writing about martial arts action cinema. However, while my emphasis is on citing informants, I recognize that there is no description without interpretation – as I discuss in Chapter 3 – and so make clear that Chapter 5 is not simply a presentation of informants’ words.

At all stages of my research I was attentive to how other theorists and researchers access and treat the words, responses and claims of actual people who experience media texts. For that reason this project is not concerned only with film studies and ethnography, but also with a range of disciplines that address issues around media text and “audience” research and analysis. Reflecting a widely-held but not uncontested opinion, Lewis suggests that ‘[i]t is within the broad rubric of cultural studies that some of the more innovative audience research has come’ (1991: 37). With this in mind I now discuss the range of areas in which research and theorization pertinent to my project has been and continues to be carried out.

MY PERSPECTIVE AND ITS (INTER)DISCIPLINARY CONTEXTS

This thesis is made up, in essence, of my responses to current debates about how and why audience-media relations might be researched and theorized, and as such my essential approach is twofold. First, much of my thesis engages in current debates surrounding “the audience” and how audience members are researched and theorized. In this context I consider the history of “the audience” as well as contemporary developments in reception studies, cultural studies and related areas. I am especially concerned to investigate ways in which ethnography – grounded in qualitative research methods – has been utilized in studies of “the audience,” considering in turn current concerns about the status of cultural studies vis-à-vis ethnography, and indeed about the status of ethnography itself in contemporary anthropological circles. In discussing these and related issues, my intention is to suggest ways in which such debates might be answered or addressed in order to produce useful studies that might further our understanding of the issues by telling us more about the “audience.”

Second, I set out the case study I carried out while battling with such issues. The study offers insights into ways in which martial arts action cinema is experienced and interpreted by people who do and people who do not watch martial arts action films. It also illustrates directions in which my responses to current theoretical and methodological debates might lead actual research in studies and conceptualizations of film watchers.

I draw on the work of a range of theorists throughout my project. Some are film theorists, while many others are from the fields of cultural studies, media studies, mass

communications research and ethnography, as well as from reception studies across a range of disciplines. This range of viewpoints, theories and methodologies reflects two centrally important aspects of this project. First, it revolves around issues that are far from discipline-specific, since while my focus is on films – especially martial arts action films – work useful to theorizing film watchers takes place not only in film and reception studies but in media, cultural and communication studies more generally, as well as ethnography.

This leads to the second aspect I wish to highlight – that is, that this thesis is written and conducted “in” a Film Studies subject group which itself is “in” a School of Cultural Studies; as such it is both/either a film studies and/or a cultural studies project (depending in large part, I would suggest, on my reader’s perspective). Further, my own academic background is in philosophy (undergraduate degree); history and art (at undergraduate level); literature and film studies (undergraduate and postgraduate level); communication studies, media studies, American studies, rhetoric, ethnography (in a communication studies department) and cultural studies (all postgraduate level classes). Since I have also taught in (or rather across) most of these areas, my own interests are evidently not discipline-specific, and in many ways this project is neither discipline nor entirely subject-specific since it not only evokes a range of theories and methodologies, but looks at individuals and groups of people who may or may not watch those films, as well as at the films themselves. I return below to the issue of how delimited I am by disciplinary and subject boundaries, but for now want to stress that while the eclectic mix of theories, methods and subjects is sometimes confusing not only for my reader but for myself, I maintain that the multiple contexts in and from which I write are ultimately a positive influence on this project. So much discussion about the limitations of disciplinary boundaries has sensitized many academics to the fact that many of our studies ‘perpetuate... the notion of a circuit neatly bounded and therefore identifiable, locatable, and open to observation,’ and that especially in literary and film reception studies ‘[u]sers are cordoned off for study and therefore defined as particular subjects by virtue of their use not only of a single medium but a single genre as well’ (Radway 1988: 363). In response to these and similar concerns, I can say only that in this project I do try to avoid “cordoning off” the subjects of my research even though I site myself loosely as a film theorist linked inextricably to cultural studies.

LECTURERS AND “THE AUDIENCE”

Whether or not I write from “within” a discipline, I do write from within academia. And as such I share Radway’s concerns about how in large part the people who write reception studies (and of course film theory as well as other audience research) tend to ‘share an unconscious, naturalized, commonsense understanding of the process of communication which has itself developed in the context of our own concrete social position’ as lecturers who, as she puts it, ‘actually do speak frequently... .. within an institution grounded most fundamentally on the lecture and on the desire to make ourselves heard (1988: 360). Given the familiar and identifiable groups of students and peers to whom we address ourselves (and our lectures and articles), it is, she elaborates, ‘[n]o wonder we find it so difficult to theorize the dispersed, anonymous, unpredictable nature of the use of mass-produced, mass-mediated cultural forms’ (1988: 361). Radway’s point here has clear links with my earlier claim that much of film theory and criticism – along with other disciplines from media studies to art history and literary theory – has always already been “about” reception, and the key questions that are only just beginning to be taken seriously at all concern whose receptions are at stake in official discourse.

Radway’s discussion of the position of audience researchers as lecturers starts with an investigation into the etymology and connotations of the word “audience” as *the* word around which so many current debates and confusions revolve – an investigation to which I return later in this chapter. But for now I wish to address the significance of the disciplinary areas of “reception studies” and “cultural studies” in this study as well as to questions of audience research more generally.

RECEPTION STUDIES &/AS FILM STUDIES

Reception studies take place not only in film studies but also in a number of disciplines which each already have a range of theoretical and methodological approaches on which to draw. In addition, theorists have, in studying audiences, evoked theoretical and methodological approaches from still other disciplines in an attempt to grasp the slippery object of study that “the audience” provides.

I have already outlined a few key aims and characteristics of reception studies within film studies as articulated by film theorists such as Staiger and Maltby, both of whom are significant contributors to the expanding but still marginal field. Much reception work in film studies is historical: Staiger and Hansen as well as the contributors to Stokes and Maltby’s *American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the*

Early Sound Era (1999) focus on early cinema, after all, while Stacey, Tyler and others investigate the memories and contexts of film watchers in the middle of the twentieth century. Increasingly, though, theorists are researching more recent and contemporary films and watchers, providing studies of those who have watched, for instance *Reservoir Dogs*, *Basic Instinct* and *Judge Dredd*.⁶ This shift, though, does not mean that historical and contemporary reception work are all that different in essence. Whether working with older or newer films and watchers, concerns and ideas can and should be shared - especially those about the historical specificity of all reception and its analysis - even when methods have to differ for practical reasons. And indeed, while in this thesis I spend more time considering studies that share my concerns with popular contemporary films, a number of ideas and methods proposed by Stacey, Staiger and other historical reception theorists are not only useful but essential to my project⁷.

It is common for reception theorists in film studies to acknowledge and work with the theories and methods proposed by reception theorists in other disciplines. This is especially true since it is not in film studies but in literary, media and other cultural studies that most work on “audiences” has been done. Certainly many film theorists interested in reception are greatly indebted to 1970s television researchers such as David Morley, Stuart Hall, Charlotte Brunsdon and others in cultural studies whose work with “audiences” challenged – and continues to challenge - both film theory’s and more dominant models’ assumptions about and representations of people who watch mass media texts. And while my focus in this project is on the ways that film theory and criticism can benefit from ethnographic theories and methods, since much audience work of pertinence to films has been and continues to be carried out “in” cultural studies - and since my own perspective is informed substantially by cultural studies - I now adumbrate what I regard as the aims and methods of that perspective.

CULTURAL STUDIES AND/AS FILM STUDIES

Cultural studies has a decidedly political approach to establishing its objects and aims of study. Despite its multiple approaches, commentators of cultural studies agree that

⁶ My references here are to studies by Hill, Austin and Barker and Brooks, respectively.

⁷ Barker and Brooks similarly recognize their indebtedness to and common interests with certain historical film reception theorists, noting for instance that ‘*Interpreting Films* shares many of our concerns and develops a number of the same ideas about audiences’ (1998a: 150).

it is centrally concerned not only with describing and accounting for cultural forms and objects, but also with laying bare, interrogating and intervening in power structures implicated in such information. As Grossberg, Nelson & Trenchler put it, cultural studies holds to the notion that ‘intellectual work is, by itself, incomplete unless it enters back into the world of cultural and political power and struggle’ (6). It is this political drive that provokes cultural studies’ pragmatic and reflexive approach to theories, methods and disciplinary boundaries – and this, I believe, makes it an ideal perspective from which to study “the audience.”

In their introduction to a collection of essays on cultural studies, Grossberg *et al* discuss how and why cultural studies as a practice ‘draws from whatever field is necessary to produce the knowledge required for a particular project’ (2), underlining the extent to which it takes an interdisciplinary and multi-methodological approach to the study of culture. More recently, in the context of feeling the need to *defend* ‘the centrality of interdisciplinarity to the project of cultural studies’ (Morley 1998: 479) – a point to which I will return - Morley has pointed out that ‘[t]here are endless dangers facing any attempt to develop a schematic overview of work in our field which attempts to establish too clear and one-directional a story-line of ‘intellectual progress,’ characterized by a series of clear epistemological and/or methodological breaks’ (1998: 493). This point is well taken, and not only in the context of cultural studies but of audience and reception studies more generally. Indeed, what I – along with many others – find so attractive about cultural studies is precisely its *ad hoc* attitude towards issues that in so many disciplines require adherence to unquestioned but often flawed orthodoxies (of theoretical approach, epistemology and methodology). I also believe that film studies has a clear affinity with cultural studies in this regard; both “disciplines” are comparatively new, and share an eclectic range of approaches. Of course some academics are decidedly negative about the range of discourses evident in “new” disciplines – Garth Jowett and James M. Linton, for instance, disparagingly remark that in film studies ‘[m]ethodologies seem to be almost as numerous as the scholars and approaches in the area’ (14). While I agree that there have been and remain problems around film theorists who ‘have *simply* transferred the approaches, techniques and methodologies of their own original disciplines’ (Jowett & Linton 14, my emphasis), this is hardly the same issue as the discipline embracing and utilizing a range of approaches to meet a range of challenges – something that critics such as Jowett and Linton fail to acknowledge. (It also seems somewhat hypocritical, since Jowett and Linton make these criticisms in context of setting out their own project to

look at films precisely from *their* disciplinary perspectives – ‘as a facet of culture and mass art’ (16).)

Fitting well with Hall’s identification of cultural studies as a ‘discursive formation’ with ‘no simple origins’ (Hall 1992: 278) is Richard Johnson’s (1986/7) description of cultural studies as an *alchemy* – an idea that I find extremely appealing not least because it underlines the idea of the uncertainty of outcomes, of the lack of permanence of the solutions offered, and of how issues of power are central in determining whether or not something is an accepted form of intellectual and/or academic work. As such, the description is suggestive not only of how cultural studies works but how it is perceived. The projects of alchemy, after all, were perceived as decidedly dubious – as indeed some of them were. As time passed, however, the benefits of those projects have emerged, and the very existence of such projects has changed subsequent thought in important ways. However, if we are to take Johnson’s description seriously, we must also note his warning (echoing Morley’s more recent article) that if cultural studies ‘is an alchemy... codification might halt its ability to bring about reactions’ (Grossberg *et al* 2). It is in this context of alchemy, then, that cultural studies and film studies have turned – indeed, have been *able* to turn – to ethnography to try to answer questions posed by reception studies and/as theories of “the audience.”

THE RECUPERATIVE TENDENCY OF RECEPTION STUDIES

Much of the audience and reception work carried out on television and film watchers has displayed a keen interest in working with traditionally and popularly maligned and denigrated genres and/or perceived audience groups. These studies often have a clear intention to justify as well as explain the pleasures available to the audiences (and from the texts) they research. Referencing the work of Dorothy Hobson, Radway and others, Shaun Moores notes that many such projects are carried out by feminist cultural critics who ‘have attempted to ‘rescue’ the denigrated media forms that are traditionally associated with feminine audiences – so-called ‘women’s genres’ such as soap opera and romantic fiction’ (1996: 7). Such studies, by revealing ‘the highly skilled and discriminating nature of fans’ [or other audience members]’ interpretations and preferences,’ show “the audience” of denigrated media genres to be not “zombies,” but gendered readers with less “cultural capital” (cf. Bourdieu; Moores 1996: 8).

In film theory, some reception work has been carried out on another denigrated sub-genre – that of the slasher film (Clover 1992) – as well as on the group of films identified by what has been termed ‘new brutalism’ (Hill 1997). Also, as I mention above, Barker and Brooks study watchers of *Judge Dredd* – a much-maligned film from the frequently critically condemned sub-genre of futuristic action-adventure – while my own case study of course focuses on martial arts action cinema. And there can be no doubt that if soap operas are seen in cultural discourse as ‘the object of the naïve gaze against which the aesthetic gaze is constructed’ (Brundson 1989: 117), then so too are martial arts action films – just as their audience members are pretty much without exception conceptualized (or, rather, caricatured) by theorists and critics alike as being subjects who are capable only of a naïve gaze. In this sense my case study enters wholeheartedly into reception studies’ feminist-driven tendency to “rescue” denigrated genres, even while being wary not to be uncritically celebratory of “the audience” – or what might more usefully be termed their experiences.

Overall, it is perhaps unsurprising that so many feminist scholars have been first in line to actually produce reception studies, since the ethnographic approach involved can be seen to fit most effectively alongside the body of work in cultural studies ‘by feminist, black, and postcolonialist theorists concerned with identity, history, and social relationships’ (Hall 1992: 14) – issues with which an attention to “the audience” as socially constructed individuals is already concerned.

“THE AUDIENCE” AS AN OBJECT OF STUDY

The recent look to ethnographic theories and methods to aid reception work reveals not only a lack of faith in available methods to study “the audience” but also dissatisfactions with established concepts of what constitutes “the audience” as an “object” of study in the first place. If recent epistemological upheavals have moved us away from the notion that there is an identifiable “audience” (or set of audiences) “out there” as a stable entity that can be observed, categorized and otherwise theorized, they have simultaneously moved us toward a very confused notion of what then constitutes the object of study for reception and audience work. This is especially problematic because the term “audience” has become so naturalized by the continued and ‘invested interests of media institutions (as well as many academic researchers) in imagining the existence of such a fixed object to measure or monitor’ (Moore 1996: 2). As a result of this, it often seems that such an object *does* exist, and it is certainly

difficult for most theorists to proceed in ways that genuinely incorporate a recognition that “it” does not.

Of course it might be argued that academic researchers deserve better than to be merely bracketed off from media institutions in Moores’ quotation, above, since as Ang argues, cultural studies is very different from market research because of its *politics* – specifically, ‘market research must always stop short of fully embracing the theoretical consequences of the consistent radical contextualism which underpins the culturalist turn within academic communication theory and research’ (Ang 1996: 72). However, as I argue above, much of the work that constitutes film theory and criticism reveals a range of sweeping assumptions and generalizations made about viewers by theorists and critics that reflect many of the assumptions and generalizations made by market researchers. Such parallels⁸ need to be acknowledged fully before they can be challenged effectively, but there is very little evidence in reception studies or other audience research that this problem *is* being addressed.

One particular problem here is that too often reception studies respond to the tendency of “effects” theorists and media critics to impute “negative” effects of media texts to certain viewers or groups of viewers merely by arguing that such viewers are actually effected in “positive” ways by those texts. Such a position does nothing to challenge the status of “the audience” as open to the “effects” of the text, even if it does challenge the particular ways in which “effects” are calculated or assumed. Reception and audience research is still effectively seen by both “sides” – those who see the “the audience” as vulnerable and passive *and* those who want to defend “it” as active – as “effects” research, and as such “the audience” is still seen as something that can not only be “effected,” but is largely unaware of what’s happening to it. In this context, especially, “the audience” is still conceptualized very much as “other” by theorists and critics alike, who claim that texts effect other people, but not themselves.⁹ I discuss more fully in Chapter 2 the roots of the conceptualization of watchers as “others” who are open to “effects” and how far it pervades supposedly post-“effects” tradition studies; for now I continue the discussion of how “the audience” is conceptualized as an object of study.

⁸ A number of these are usefully elaborated and discussed by Barker and Brooks in Chapter 1 of *Knowing Audiences*.

⁹ I find this tendency in film theory and criticism particularly worrying because of the extent to which it is taken up and shared by students of film studies, many of whom seem quite happy to assert what a film means for “viewers” without recognizing and working in the significance of their own status as a viewer.

WHAT IS “THE AUDIENCE”?

In Radway's discussion of the position of audience researchers as lecturers, cited earlier, her starting point is an investigation into the etymology and connotations of the word “audience.” The points she makes shed light on ways in which academic researchers have consistently conceptualized “the audience” as open to the “effects” of media texts. Noting the origins of the “audience” as a term referring to face-to-face communication, Radway argues that its development to refer to readers of texts ‘suggests that all reception had been conceived as a variation of listening’ (1988: 359-360). In essence, her point here is that ‘our powerfully naturalized conception of people who use mass-produced cultural texts as an audience of receivers subtly privileges the moment of enunciation as production and focuses attention on the subsequent circuit of exchange’ (1988: 361). This in turn indicates for Radway that part of the failings of reception studies lies in the questions it asks (or fails to ask). This is because, as she elaborates, in the discursive system assumed by academics, ‘where people are constructed principally as receivers of the messages of others, those people can wield power in only the most circumscribed of ways’ (1988: 361): The only “activity” allowed the audience member is that of resistance or refusal (to look and/or listen), not of producing meaning.

In response to this situation, Radway holds that studying the production of culture ‘within the everyday’ is ‘a way of trying to understand how social subjects are at once hailed successfully by dominant discourses and therefore dominated by them and yet manage to adapt them to their own other, multiple purposes and even to resist or contest them’ (1988: 368). Here, Radway proposes that reception studies should not delimit its object of study to texts and audiences, but should turn its attention to ‘the everyday.’ Similarly, Ang believes we should beware of ‘overstating the relevance of audience studies within cultural studies,’ arguing ‘for the need to be aware of the limits of using the trope of media audiences for understanding contemporary culture’ (Ang 1996: 14). This desire to broaden the approach to “the audience” makes sense on many levels – not least because films and television programmes are not the only important elements in contemporary society. However, while I agree with Ang that ‘studying media audiences is not interesting or meaningful in its own right, but becomes so only when it points towards a broader critical understanding of the peculiarities of contemporary culture’ (Ang 1996: 4), I am not convinced that studying ‘the everyday’ *rather than* people’s responses to media texts helps develop that understanding. Also, with Barker and Brooks, I strongly oppose this ‘tendency to the

dissolution of interest in people's responses to particular texts, in favour of what Ien Ang has called 'methodological situationalism', which would focus primarily on the life-circumstances under which people meet particular media' precisely because 'this is simply disrespectful to the very audiences whom we claim to be listening to – many of whom show by the way they talk about particular films, books, kinds of music etc that they care enormously about them' (1998a: 103-104).

Barker and Brooks's point here indicates the extent to which the actual individuals who make up "the audience" are regularly ignored or elided even in work supposedly committed to their voices. Certainly "even" in the 1988 article by Radway, and in Ang's studies, 'it is not *actual* individuals but an *idea* of an individual which is being debated' – as is so often the case in audience theory and research (Barker 185). I think this is the key problem in the majority of studies of "the audience" – quite simply that actual individual members of "the audience" are so rarely referenced, and that when they are those references do not make it into subsequent theorizations of "the audience." It is for this reason that I cite participant-informants individually in my case study, and argue that generalizations about their responses are largely untenable. This is part of my attempt to not only acknowledge but actively embrace and deal with the fact that the case study 'proliferates rather than narrows' so that '[o]ne is left with more to pay attention to rather than less' (Stake 24).

And as a challenge to arguments that we should turn our attention to a study of 'the everyday' (Radway) and/or 'radical contextualism' (Ang) rather than audience-media relations, I would cite Kirsten Drotner's powerful point that 'substituting a multiple media context for the media text does not resolve the problem of interpretation' (343).

FILMS & FILM-EXPERIENCES, NOT "AUDIENCES," AS SUBJECTS OF STUDY

Overall, considering the difficulties and complex issues surrounding the identity of what constitutes "the audience" and whether or not, or how far, it should constitute the object of study for cultural studies, reception studies, *etcetera*, I am not convinced that "the audience" should be conceptualized as an object of study at all. Rather, I would suggest that people's experiences of films should be studied and integrated into our (academic) theories about and (professional) criticisms of films and the responses they evoke. In my study, then, "the audience" is not the "object of study" as such, but another resource to assist in and inform our studies of and theories about films (and/or other media texts). My conviction is that such an approach to "the audience" is far more appropriate because it de-objectifies people, focusing instead on their reported

experiences and what those can add to our understanding of the texts in which we are interested. In many ways, I favour this approach because it treats people who are neither academics nor professional film critics as still valid sources and speakers – rather than merely as people to be studied and/or theorized. Importantly, too, it avoids treating people as unable to recognize what the media might or might not be “doing” to them – even in the face of popular and academic writing that constantly suggests or assumes an “effects” model of some description.

I do not claim that my application of this approach in my case study is flawless, or that each participant’s views are necessarily as fully and/or accurately represented as s/he might like (nor do I claim that I treat professional film theorists and critics in such a manner). What I do claim is that such an approach at least attempts to treat individual participants *as* individuals with experiences, responses and opinions worth considering as such. I also offer this approach as an attempt to answer – at least provisionally, and at least in part – Barker’s call for academics to provide accounts that can be assessed on their ‘ability to throw light on what real, concrete audiences do and say with their media’ (rather than on what *possible* audiences might do or say), and as such might help to address the problem that ‘the research that most contradicts and steals people’s languages for their *own* media responses is that which most informs political and policy debates’ (Barker 190).

It is important to emphasize that treating participants as individuals does *not* mean that important aspects of their identity – such as their race, age or gender – are ignored or elided: On the contrary, these elements of identity are acknowledged in the case study (where the information is available to me) and also commented upon at times. The point is, though, that such characteristics are seen as socially significant precisely for each *individual* informant, rather than as tools that enable me to make claims about how “women” or any other conceptual category of “viewers” do or may likely perceive martial arts action films. I am unwilling to make such claims precisely because conceptual categories are infinitely less diverse, complex and sophisticated than are the individuals to whom these categories are applied.

The approach I suggest offers one of the few ways in which film theorists and critics can really divorce themselves from the stereotypes that inform the “audiences” of the marketplace. In this context, I think that terms such as “the audience,” “the spectator” and “the viewer” are unhelpful in studies that hope to break free from the

epistemological “baggage” of those very terms. The fact is that I feel very awkward using terms such as “the audience” or even “the viewer.” I prefer the latter because it at least individualizes people, but dislike its obvious privileging of sight and all that carries with it – not least an epistemology that privileges observing rather than listening to “the audience” (an issue I discuss in Part II). “The audience” has equally problematic implications - outlined in Radway’s discussion of it cited above, and of course by its particular appropriation by the “effects” tradition. The “spectator” is perhaps a less problematic term because it has more specific links with particular theories and ideas; certainly it has not become so widespread a term as either “audience” or “viewer.” That in itself makes it difficult to use, though, since I do not want to imply an allegiance with the models of audience-media relations used by those who choose the term “spectator.”

“Film experiencers”

What this means for me is a rejection of the three key terms in audience research and reception studies. I refer to “film-experiencers” rather than to “viewers,” “audience-members,” “audiences” or “spectators” in my case study. The aim here is twofold. First, I use a different term simply to reject the baggage that comes with the traditional terms. Second, and perhaps more important, I use a term that points to how people’s experiences of films are not limited to simply viewing or hearing, since ‘if you talk with people you find that media experiences are almost always multi-sensual’ (Barker 188). Here, it is worth drawing attention to Barker and Brooks’s use of art historian Michael Baxandall’s work when discussing this notion, since his argument offers an explanation for film reception theorists finding that film experiencers often don’t talk about films in purely – or even primarily – visual terms. As Barker and Brooks write:

Baxandall’s argument shows that just because film is *visual* in its medium, does not mean that *our encounter* with it is primarily to do with a *way of seeing*. It is not the medium which determines the manner of response, but the place of that medium within a social and cultural circuit, and the tasks given to that medium in the life of that society (1998a: 136).

In addition, the reference to people’s *experiences* of films, rather than just their seeing or hearing them, allows room for ways in which people’s expectations of films, what they hear and see about them, and so on, factor in as part of their “experience;” it also allows that people who have not actually sat through a screening of a film (or video) might still have an “experience” of it. These points are useful and important to the ways in which I want to treat people as film-experiencers, even though my focus *is* on people’s responses to actually sitting in front of a screen on which a film (or video) is

playing. Using a new term also gives a sense of how important words are to situating theories and methodologies. Similarly, using the term “watcher” rather than “viewer” indicates the power and significance of word-choice, as well as enabling me to distinguish between those film experiencers who watch martial arts action films, and those who do not.

Film experiencers, watchers and non-watchers

It remains important to distinguish between those film experiencers who have and those who have not actually watched the films about which they talk or write; this enables the comparison of responses of informants who *have* seen martial arts action films with those who either have not seen any or have only seen one, or perhaps just segments of several films. Rather than revert back to the term “viewer” for this purpose, though, I use the term “watcher.” Again, this term – like film experiencer – is useful because it rejects much of the baggage associated with terms such as “viewer,” “spectator” and “audience.” I also prefer it because, as Thomas Sutcliffe suggests, watching ‘is altogether more vigilant than “viewing”’ (xiv). Indeed, Sutcliffe provides several reasons which suggest the term “watcher” better suits my study (even though his emphasis on visual as opposed to other cinematic experiences is not in line with my approach). Many of these reasons are illustrated when he writes that:

The verb ‘to watch’ has a slightly curious status in the idiom of cinema-going. When someone asks you to accompany them to the cinema they are more likely, in Britain at least, to ask whether you want to ‘see a film’. And ‘seeing’ [like ‘viewing’] is a word that usually implies a kind of passivity of reception. It’s true that we also use it as a way of referring to mental understanding but, when used specifically of vision, ‘seeing’ is a kind of lowest common denominator, only one step above that most passive of all phrases – ‘taking in a movie’. If our eyes are open, we will see something, whether we like it or not (xiii – xiv).

It might be argued, given my interest in non-watchers as well as watchers of martial arts action films, that my study is not a study of film watchers as they have been and continue to be identified, categorized and conceptualized in reception and audience studies. This is fine by me; my interest is, as the title suggests, to cite people who experience films as part of the process of understanding films and their significances in society. In this context I believe that ethnography has an important role to play in developing ways in which people’s experiences of films can be accessed and understood; as such, while much of this chapter and Part II of my thesis investigates ways in which reception and audience work engages in an “ethnographic turn,” my concern is not necessarily to implement ethnographic theories and methods in a study of “the audience.” Rather, I want to suggest that ethnographic theories and methods

can be useful in accessing people's experiences of films that might increase academics' and critics' understandings of films and their significances as part of contemporary culture. This might well seem to be a study of "the audience" by another name, but another name is precisely what is needed to shake off a number of problematic assumptions that go along with terms traditionally used to denote people who experience films and other media texts in a whole range of ways other than simply "viewing" them

If the confusion and anxiety about what "the audience" is has contributed to the turn to ethnography, this turn is not without its complications and critics. Chapter 3 elaborates issues surrounding the possible and potential uses of ethnography for studying film, and also outline debates surrounding whether or not cultural and reception studies can be said to be engaging in ethnography in any meaningful sense, or indeed at all.

FINAL COMMENTS

Thus far I have introduced concerns stemming from the presumptuousness of textual analysis in film theory and criticism, and from the problem of the gap evident between theorists' and critics' conceptualizations of the film "audience" and its experiences and the identities and experiences of *actual* film experiencers. I have also pointed to ways in which a range of researchers and theorists have responded to such concerns by carrying out various forms of audience and reception work. These issues are all considered more fully in Parts II and III of this study, where I first elaborate on the ways in which film experiencers have been inadequately caricatured by film theory and criticism, and then illustrate the gap between such caricatures and actual film experiencers.

I have also suggested that much audience and reception work is plagued by problems such as the "baggage" of terms it employs and the concerns about the methodologies it appropriates (especially from ethnography). Indicating possible responses to these problems, I call for a rejection of traditional terms in favour of creating and working with new terms, and suggest the need to re-think the status of film experiencers as informants who are *participant in* rather than subjects or objects of study, where the study in question is *of films* rather than of participants *per se*.

Overall, I argue that film theorists and critics need to address the shortness of the gap 'between objective characterization and objectifying caricature' (Rosaldo 54) that they so regularly ignore or elide in their hypothesizations so often based on assumptions

rather than knowledge about film experiencers. It is with this goal in mind that my discussions in Part II and case study in Part III are carried out – always aware of the tensions between treating film experiencers as sources of information and as subjects of study themselves. The desire to treat film experiencers as participant-informants worth citing rather than objects to study, then, informs and drives my overall project as well as my particular case study.

PART II: FRAMING THEORIES, METHODOLOGIES & DEBATES

'how one conceptualises the audience – and the empirical adequacy of one's conceptualisations – is fundamental to every assumption one can make about how stars, and films, work'

- Richard Dyer, 1979¹

¹ Richard Dyer. *Stars*. London: BFI, 1979: 182. Interestingly, Martin Barker and Kate Brooks cite this part of Dyer's work (in the context of a longer quotation) to initiate their concluding chapter entitled 'What should be done (but probably won't be)' (Barker & Brooks 1998a: 301). This shows a perhaps unsurprising similarity in the influences on our two independently-conceived projects.

CHAPTER 2: THEORIES OF MEDIA EXPERIENCE & THE “EFFECTS” TRADITION

It is not only film theory and criticism that grapple with ways to understand and articulate experiences and experiencers of mass media forms. Despite an increasing interest in film experiencers in film studies over recent years, it remains the case that the vast majority of work of real pertinence to researching and theorizing actual film experiencers has been discussed and carried out in media and cultural studies. Most of this work, too, concerns television rather than film (or video) experiencers. But while the differences between the media of film, video and television have important implications for the usefulness and applicability to film experiencers of methods and theories developed for and from studying television “viewers,” theories from media and cultural studies provide an invaluable context in which to understand and locate attitudes towards the “audience” in film theory and criticism. Also, of course, for many people “watching a film” often takes place on video rather than at a theatre – something especially evident in the case of martial arts action films, which do notoriously well in video rentals and sales.

While in this chapter I do focus on film, I also draw on a number of works from mass communications research and from media and cultural studies “reception” work. Including such sources provides not only a clearer understanding of the contexts in which film theory and criticism have conceptualized and treated film experiencers, but also a range of potential starting points from which to develop new, film-oriented theories and methods of incorporating the experiences of actual people into understanding and analyzing films.

THE “AUDIENCE,” THE “SPECTATOR,” & THE “VIEWER”

Media experiencers have been variously conceptualized and defined as the “audience” or “audience members,” as the (ideal) “spectator,” and as the “viewer.” Generally, early theorists and those of the “effects” tradition tend to refer to the “audience” rather than viewers or spectators, as do a great deal of theorists and researchers who challenge traditional conceptions and understandings of the term (Ang, Barker, Brooks and Morley, for example). Since the 1970s, however, film theorists tend to refer to film experiencers as “spectators,” and the term has become commonplace across film theory even while theories of spectatorship have undergone considerable mutations. Meanwhile, still other theorists have opted to refer to the

“viewer,” often in a deliberate attempt to differentiate their theories and conceptualizations of experiencers from those who refer to either the “audience” or the “spectator.” Such writers are often reception theorists, who emphasize the individual status of the experiencer (rather than elide it as part of the “audience”), but find the theory-laden and text-centric term “spectator” inappropriate. Film critics tend also to use the terms less theory-laden, preferring “viewer/s” or “audience” rather than “spectator.”

These contexts are those in which I create the new term, film experiencer, to use in this study. However, the outline I give here of terminology used to denote and thus conceptualize people who experience media forms is generalizing and somewhat simplified. Partly because of that, I now move to consider the problems of setting out any kind of “overview” of the vast area of work within which my current project is inevitably located.

THE PROBLEM WITH OVERVIEWS

It is tempting to present an overview of work that has been carried out on the “audience,” the “spectator” and the “viewer” in order to situate my own treatment of film experiencers in that broad history. However, there are two key problems with such an approach. First, one of my primary goals is to *add* something to the still comparatively small body of work that deals in various ways with film and other cultural media experiencers, rather than simply add yet more to the ‘legion’ of critical, theoretical and ‘overview’ work written *about* such projects (cf. Gray 25). Second, along with writers such as Ann Gray and Pertti Alasuutari, I recognize the extent to which “overviews” in any theoretical context are highly problematic. This is first because they inevitably generalize and over-simplify the field, and second because they are inevitably partial and perspectival. In reception and audience studies as in any field, after all, there are always ‘many other ways to tell its history’, as Alasuutari points out in his own version of that history (1999a: 1-2). More specifically, in an article where she considers ‘the damage done to audience studies by the ‘overview’ (22), Gray argues that ‘the most extreme version of the ‘active audience’ is a myth, emerging rarely in its ‘pure’ form,’ and that the ‘myth’ is constituted largely in and by overviews and their authors rather than by actual audience study researchers and authors (Gray 25). She also points out the lack of attention given by ‘overview’ writers to specific contexts of studies, citing the retrospective, over-simplified characterizations of Hall’s encoding/ decoding model as a prime example of a study that suffers from such treatment (Gray 26-27).

I therefore have no intention of presenting an “overview” of the field to which I hope to add in this project. Instead, in this chapter I look at *particular* conceptualizations of and hypotheses about film experiencers throughout the twentieth century, considering in each case not only the model under investigation but its contexts and pertinence to my own project. As such I hope to provide a sense of how hypotheses about, conceptions of and research into film experiencers have taken place at various times, and how those bear on contemporary debates, without suggesting that I fully illustrate and explain the field and its development as a whole. In contrast, I am up front about presenting a selective “history” of the field that foregrounds film experiencers rather than other media experiencers, and that foregrounds issues of particular pertinence to my concerns².

I would like to start, though, by challenging a claim made regularly by overviews about the status of the “effects” model in the development of audience and reception work – the claim that the “effects” model was overthrown by “uses and gratifications” theories, by Hall’s encoding/decoding model, by reception studies and also by a general shift towards notions of an “active” rather than “passive” audience.

THE IMPACT OF THE “EFFECTS” MODEL

Although much of the work I discuss and present in this project is not part of the “effects” tradition, I want to acknowledge and address the seriousness with which the academic influence and social power of the “effects” model must be treated in anyone interested to challenge its stranglehold and suggest alternative ways to conceptualize experiencer-media relations.

As Barker and Brooks point out, we should not in all the excitement about reception work and ethnographic studies of media experiencers lose sight of the fact that

[s]till... the largest amount of research being conducted and passing itself off as ‘audience research’ is the policy-driven, psychologically-oriented ‘effects’ research’ (1998a: 10).

It is equally important to recognize that it is a mistake for those who discuss and theorize media experiencer work to treat ‘the history of audience research essentially as an academic history’ when in fact ‘the history of audiences has been almost entirely dominated by non-academic concerns: commercial, public-opinion, ideological, and

² Any reader who *does* wish to read an overview of “audience” research *per se* has plenty texts from which to choose.

directly political' (ibid. 85). This not only reminds us that what is at stake in work on experienter-media relations is definitively not only of concern to academics, but suggests that academic work in the field has almost undoubtedly been shaped by such concerns and their assumptions that "audience" research is essentially research about influences. Further, the "effects" or influences claimed do not have to be negative to contribute towards this conceptualization of what constitutes "audience" research. While much recent work in reception studies challenges the "effects" tradition by arguing for 'pro-social effects' rather than the 'harm' done by the media, for instance, this does nothing to displace the problematic key assumption that 'research into audiences is research into influences' (ibid. 85).

Thus, while it seems that a large number of studies now call for a move "beyond" the "effects" debate, a closer look at many of them reveals an underlying focus on the influences of the mass media still exists. A number of studies, for instance, do as Graham Murdock does in his 1979 co-authored article 'reviewing the state of debate on the links between television and delinquency and raising questions about the status of the research evidence supporting claims for a direct causal connection' (Murdock 110). In concluding the study, Murdock writes, the researchers argue 'that the terms of the debate should be widened beyond the concentration on the 'effects' of televisual violence to encompass other, less obvious connections' (for example, connections between property crimes and television's 'celebration of consumerism' in ads and game shows) (ibid. 110-111). Here, while the call to 'widen' concerns beyond those of "effects" is both evident and welcome, influence *remains* the focus of research, since even what is identified as "beyond" the concentration on the 'effects' of television involves the influences of television on its experiencers.

Similarly, in her study of "violent film viewers" that I discuss below, Hill opens with the clear and welcome assertion that 'there are more productive ways to debate screen violence... [and] areas of investigation other than the cause-effect debate' (Hill 1), explaining that because of this her project concerns itself with 'emotional responses, not behavioural effects' (2). Here again, though, her articulation of what she provides in her book somewhat undermines her apparent rejection of the "effects" model, since she identifies her project as 'an attempt to indicate the *positive* responses to be gained from viewing violent movies' (Hill 3, my emphasis). This phrase, and the goals it describes, suggests that her concern *is* after all still with the "effects" of films, even if – like many other reception researchers – her aim is to reject the claims of the "effects" tradition that "violent" films produce harmful, negative effects.

In neither of these cases, nor in others to which I refer in this project, do I wish to discredit the aims or research work of theorists obviously exasperated by the “effects” tradition’s strong tendency to impute harmful and/or harmful effects to television, film and video watching. In many ways their work to recuperate media forms and experiences *do* mount a challenge to the “effects” tradition and its dominant arguments. However, I ultimately agree with Barker and Brooks that much reception and audience work that places itself outside the “effects” tradition nevertheless brings much of that tradition with it (1998a: 87 *et passim*). In their own version of the history of the field Barker and Brooks set out how and why they believe the three ‘main models of media-audience relations’ that developed after and in response to the “effects” model carry with them much of the “effects” tradition they aimed to escape (1998a: 87). Characterizing the development of responses to the “effects” model as so many commentators do, they look first at the “uses and gratifications” model; second at the encoding/ decoding model; and finally at the hermeneutic model (*ibid.* 86-103).

Ultimately, Barker and Brooks’s central criticism of the “effects” model and its legacy is that whether ‘harmful’ or ‘pro-social’ effects are claimed, the questions at the core of such so-called audience or reception research are *moral* rather than *research* ones (*ibid.* 85). In contrast, they suggest researchers investigate not what *influence* the media might or might not have on its experiencers, but what pleasures (and displeasures) are experienced, for instance, or how to understand the ‘practical reasonings... in people’s cinematic choices’ (1998a: 80). Studies that engage with such questions, rather than focusing on issues of influence, would have to ask very different questions of experiencers than those reception and audience researchers are used to asking. The practical difficulties of this are clear from my own case study as well as in Barker and Brooks’s project on *Judge Dredd*, where they note that their preconceptions often ‘infected’ their own research, influencing ‘the way [they] asked questions’ of experiencers and making ‘it difficult for [them] to understand the answers [they] got, when they defied [their] expectations’ (Barker and Brooks 1998b: 222).

A note on “effects,” influence and acculturation

While the issue of “effects” cannot currently be completely bypassed in any work on experiencers, I think they should be - and legitimately could be. Essentially, my position rests on the notion that there is no evidence to imbue mass media forms with any more direct “effects” on people’s behaviour and attitudes than other aspects of

culture that are widely held to play a role in individuals' acculturation (such as fairy tales, gossip, parental role models, and so on): What I think needs to be taken *very* seriously by theorists, critics and researchers interested in the "audience" is, in essence, what Alasuutari puts thus:

the old question of whether mass communication affects its audience or whether the audiences have an active role is – within the broader societal frame – roughly the same as to ask whether society has an impact on the individual (1999 17).

Here Alasuutari points to problems with talking about and theorizing media texts as somehow especially or uniquely significant in "influencing" or "effecting" those who experience them – even though this is something that the vast majority of theorists as well as critics of films and other media texts tend to assume, explicitly or not.

What needs to be recognized is that theorists who attack the "effects" tradition are *not* suggesting that media texts have no influence on media experiencers. Rather, they (we) suggest that media texts have no more direct influence on experiencers than do the many other components of a culture riddled with mechanisms of acculturation, and further that people's influence on media texts is just as important to consider – bringing us back full circle to the issue of how far society shapes the individual and *vice versa*³. Centrally, though, what theorists opposed to the "effects" tradition in any form want to explode is the notion that when studying media texts and experiencers, questions of effect or influence are essential – or even important. As I found in my own research, and as Barker and Brooks found when researching *Judge Dredd's* audiences, film experiencers have far more – and far more interesting – things to say about watching films than simply what "effects" or influences the films might or might not have⁴.

FILM THEORY & FILM EXPERIENCERS

While the majority of media experienter work has been carried out by media and cultural theorists rather than film theorists, the earliest twentieth century discourses

³ What this does *not* mean, of course, is that media experiencers necessarily "get what they want," as the industry and many theorists and critics suggest. That is, the view that media texts are influenced by media experiencers does *not* imply that media experiencers are not influenced by media texts as well as other forms of acculturation.

⁴ At the same time, much of what they say *does* allude to or explicitly address questions of influence and "effect" – partly because, as Barker and Brooks also found, the majority of research participants tend to assume that audience research *is* influence research.

about them were concerned primarily with film since television had of course not yet been invented. This is not to suggest film was the first media form to raise the interest of social commentators and communications theorists. The sixteenth century saw major concerns voiced about the emergence of the printing press, for instance, and subsequent concerns about the “effects” of newspapers and novels on people might well be included in such a history. Also, the emergence of new technologies such as the wireless⁵ and the telegraph precipitated widespread speculation and concern about their “effects” that continued alongside debates about screen-based media forms in the twentieth century.

EARLY CONCEPTIONS OF FILM EXPERIENCERS

Many early twentieth century theorists pondered what changes new technologies might bring to the social world and the individuals that make up that world. And despite concerns voiced by many about perceived and potential negative effects of moving pictures on public morality and behaviour, more often than not commentators were optimistic about the future – often because they held strong views about the strength of the human mind, or human being, to adapt positively to the technological changes they had themselves brought about.

In 1909, for instance, Charles Horton Cooley cheerfully predicted that ever-expanding communications technologies would provide individuals with increased knowledge and the facilities to organize that knowledge to democratic ends. Cooley believed that the increased stimuli to which individuals had access via new technologies would result in the growth of the mind⁶. Cooley assumes that the reciprocal nature of mass communications technologies will be developed, and subsequently is not as worried as he might have been by the now all too common concern that mass media technologies and messages are effectively controlled and owned by only a tiny minority of people, and that those people’s interests are far from being primarily to promote genuine, reciprocal and democratically-oriented communications between individuals⁷. In effect, Cooley theorizes media experiencers not *en masse* as “the audience” as is so often the case in later decades, but as a mass of individuals who

⁵ In the case of radio, for instance, Allison McCracken discusses anxieties around the emergence of crooning in the US between 1928-1933, looking at how ‘[t]he crooner... became a prominent target of attack and critique’ due in part to his perceived negative influences on women and culture more generally.

⁶ where he defined the interior of social organization as the mind, and the exterior as communication (Cooley 61)

⁷ See Ian Angus's article, “Democracy and the constitution of audiences.”

are decidedly active, and proactive, insofar as *using* new technologies for genuine communications is concerned. In many ways, then, Cooley might be critiqued for theorizing media experiencers as unproblematically “active.” But he cannot be attacked for initiating the “effects” model, since his notions of human agency seem to dismiss such a simplistic and reductive model.

In 1915, Vachel Lindsay was as enthusiastic and positive about cinema as Cooley had been about communications technologies in general. Writing that ‘[t]he invention of the photoplay is as great a step as was the beginning of picture writing in the stone age’ (199), Lindsay also held that ‘[i]t is a quality, not a defect, of all photoplays that human beings tend to become dolls and mechanisms, and dolls and mechanisms tend to become human’ (53). Lindsay does ring one note of pessimism, however. He does not welcome the advent of *talking* pictures, warning that

[i]f the talking moving picture becomes a reliable mirror of the human voice and frame, it will be the basis of such a separate art that none of the photoplay precedents will apply. It will be the *phonoplay*, not the photoplay (221).

Lindsay sees this as a step backwards because he regards moving pictures as art-in-motion, and his concern about the addition of sound is that ‘the pictures will be brought in as comment and ornament to the speech’ (224) rather than there as art in themselves. Such a view resonates today in a film studies where considerations of the image (sight) are so regularly privileged above those of sound (hearing) in film theory. The terms “audience,” “spectator” and “viewer” further compound this state of affairs. Ethnographic methods can go some way to balancing out the emphasis on images with an attention to what people *say* (about what they see, hear and feel) rather than purely on what they see, as I discuss in Chapter 3.

Despite his classification of moving pictures as art-in-motion, Lindsay seems to characterize film viewers as masses who need an opiate rather than as art-lovers, since he characterizes films – especially what he terms “the Crowd Photoplay” – as a ‘substitute for the saloon’ among the lower classes (Lindsay 235). Lindsay’s evidence for this lies in the fact that at the time he wrote, it was a frequent occurrence that ‘when a moving picture house is set up, the saloon on the right hand or the left declares bankruptcy’ (Lindsay 235). It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what attitude Lindsay has towards film watchers despite the fact that his comments are often quite negative, since he maintains that cinema – what they are watching - is a great invention and that moving pictures are an art form. Some clue as to why he sees cinema in such a positive light, though, exists in his triumphant claim that ‘the motion

picture house' might reasonably be called 'the first enemy of King Alcohol with real power where that king has deepest hold' (242) – that is, presumably, amongst the 'lower-class' families who could, with the advent of cinema, have 'fire pouring into their eyes instead of into their bellies' (236). It seems strange that Lindsay sees the cinema as an entirely positive social force given his claim that '[t]he things they [the audience] drank to see, and saw but grotesquely, and paid for terribly, now roll before them with no after pain or punishment' (Lindsay 237); this surely suggests that the effects of the cinema (insofar as it creates illusions, delusions, etc.) are in some ways the *same* as those of alcohol, only without the physical side effects! Despite such ambiguities, Lindsay argues that the cinema is an invention to be celebrated, writing that all "good citizens" should 'welcome the coming of the moving picture man as a local social force' (243). He also underlined the *power* of the cinema as a social force, concluding that 'It has come, then, this new weapon of men, and the face of the whole earth changes' (Lindsay 317).

Just one year after Lindsay's *The Art of the Moving Picture*, Hugo Munsterberg published *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*. Munsterberg, like Lindsay, felt that films provided a response to society's desire to be both entertained and informed, and was, as Dudley Andrew writes, 'always more concerned with the spectator end of the "communications arc" than with the filmmaking side' (Andrew 16). Certainly Cooley, Lindsay and Munsterberg are all fascinated by the psychology and sociological impact of film, and as such wrote a considerable amount about "audiences" as well as about cinema and the phenomenon of the "moving picture" itself. This reveals a clear fascination with the "effects" of moving pictures that evolved initially into the "effects" theories of the 1940s and beyond; as such, these writers are as guilty as later film theorists of abstracting and generalizing about "the audience" without consulting actual film experiencers. In many ways, then, while apparatus theory *per se* was not established in film theory until the 1970s, earlier theoretical conceptions and characterizations of film experiencers that favour abstracting and generalizing social and psychological theories made the eventual emergence of such a model unsurprising if not inevitable. It also highlights the fact that a theory has no need of being grounded in often highly theoretical textual analysis to focus on the "effects" of the text on its audience.

In each case, rather than researching what actual film experiencers believed and felt, these early theorists base their discussions and assertions about cinema and its "effects" on its watchers on the same kind of generalized and generalizing model of

the “ideal spectator” which so incenses those who are currently concerned about the notion of the “ideal spectator” and all that it implies and elides. Evident in these early writings about film experiencers, too, is a distinct tendency to consider the influence and effects of films as the focal aspect of theories about them. And while these writers seem more inclined to suggest that films have “positive” rather than “negative” effects, they don’t really focus on anything other than the causal relations between media forms and their experiencers – precisely the contemporary criticism of writers such as Barker and Brooks who call us to discover *other* aspects of experiencer-media relations.

Blumer, the Payne Fund Studies and “effects”

In an attempt to answer questions about the effects of films on experiencers raised by social commentators and theorists in the first quarter of the twentieth century, 1928 saw the establishment in the US of a set of studies financed by the Payne Fund and chaired by W.W. Charters from Ohio State University. Studies were carried out by eighteen ‘investigators’ from the fields of sociology and psychology, from across seven different academic institutions. Charters articulates the studies’ main concerns as finding out about the influence of films on *children* rather than on film experiencers overall. Citing examples of the kinds of issues and questions being raised about the effects of moving pictures in the 1920s (that is, in the run-up to the institution of the Hays Code in Hollywood), Charters introduces the studies as together having the aim ‘to provide a composite answer to the central question of the nature and extent of these influences’ (viii).

At the core of the studies was Herbert Blumer’s study entitled *Movies & Conduct*, published along with the others in 1933. The study, carried out by Blumer and several colleagues at the University of Chicago, builds on the Chicago-school method of life-biography to shed light on what Blumer calls ‘a field of conduct which, while intriguing, has deterred investigation because of its intangible character’ (xi). Describing ‘customary methods of study in social and psychological science’ as lacking any real ‘promise,’ Blumer from the start claims to have ‘dispensed with sophisticated techniques’ in favour of ‘simply [sic] ask[ing] people to relate or write as carefully as possible their experiences with motion pictures’ (xi). Since nearly all of Blumer’s caveats vis-à-vis the validity and reliability of his data concern the honesty (or not) of his “auto-biographers,” and do not pay anything more than superficial attention to his (and his researchers’) input, the “simply” here seems somewhat disingenuous. He comments from the start on the problem of a study ‘based chiefly on personal

accounts given by people of their experiences with motion pictures' (2-3) when he writes that the study's aim is 'to ascertain the kinds of influence wielded by motion pictures on conduct, *in so far as these can be determined from personal accounts*' (3, my italics). He does not, however, consider his project's *own* status as a personal account.

I would not say that the study's key problem necessarily lies in the fact that Blumer chooses the data to present in the study – after all, his comment that all his and his team's inquiries 'have yielded a wealth of material only a portion of which is being used in the present report' (11) could come from any ethnographic or reception study and not in itself be condemned. What is problematic, though, are his somewhat glib assertions about the way in which the data he uses was picked. Specifically, he asserts that '[o]nly that which seems most significant has been chosen' (11), without addressing either to whom or for what purpose data is or might be deemed "most significant," or by whom precisely and why exactly it was chosen. In many ways, Blumer's project shares much with contemporary reception studies – and indeed ethnography. This is perhaps most notable in his explicit assumption from the start that 'one way to find out about the experiences of people is to inquire into those experiences' (3). That said, Blumer's study (like some contemporary reception work) exhibits a lack of reflexivity that problematizes the ways in which he presents not only the people with whom he talks, but also his own contribution to the project.

Blumer is far from oblivious to the fact that his comments involve interpretation, writing for example that '[t]he remarks of the author are limited mostly to interpretation' (12). However, here he reveals that he sees interpretation as an overt, discrete act, entirely separable from the more general presentation of 'data' *per se*. This is clearly problematic, and undermines much of any claim that might be made about his reflexivity. Another indication of Blumer's lack of reflexivity concerning his choice of data is evident in his choice of words. He tends to write of "the study" as if it were somehow independent of him and his team, and also refers to "the author" – himself – in the third person, again indicating a distance between him and what he reports that arguably is just not there.

The problems with Blumer's study are clearly serious and render its conclusions about the effects of films on their experiencers at best dubious. At the same time, much can be learned from the study regarding both what (not) to do when researching film experiencers, and about how film experiencers in the late 1920s US experienced

films. In essence, the methods used to access and gather information about film experience/rs for *Movies & Conduct* have a great deal to recommend them and the value of the information they provided. Blumer's decision to ask people to write about their own experiences as film experiencers seems an effective and remarkably unobtrusive way in which to access film experiencers' thoughts and opinions about the cinema, and certainly seems to fit neatly into the notion of encouraging film experiencers to speak for themselves by not guiding their responses with interview or questionnaire questions. That said, it is not made explicit what precise instructions participants were given when asked to write their 'biographies,' nor is it clear how much the participants knew about the aims of Blumer's study (for instance, were they aware he was investigating links between films and "conduct"?). Certainly it seems that what Barker and Brooks refer to as 'a strongly-founded public agenda about what researching films must be all about' existed in the 1930s as it does today, and that participant perceptions of academic research into films might well have influenced participant responses then as they do now – and that that 'public agenda' is narrow and fixed around the idea that 'either it is an assessment of potential harm; or it is a case of stupid academics making work where others find waste' (1998a: 2). So, whether participants in Blumer's study were told the research was about "conduct" or not, their responses seem likely to have been influenced by such a notion, and Blumer's lack of discussion and reflexivity about that aspect of his research leaves a problematic gap in his study.

An equally serious problem with *Movies & Conduct*, though, is the way participants 'biographies' are appropriated by Blumer *et al* to fit into their *a priori* ideas and expectations of film experiencer relations to film. Blumer *et al* clearly focus on questions of "effects" and influence in reading, interpreting and writing up participant responses, and thus *a priori* foreclose any recognition, articulation or exploration of other aspects of experience evident in them. These flaws, though, do not suggest that if film experiencers-as-informants "hand over" their responses to film theorists (whether as written pieces or as taped interviews) the information would *necessarily* be treated in such a narrowly-focused and pre-ordained manner. What they show, rather, is the importance of reflexivity and openness in the process of "reading" as well as interpreting and presenting participant responses: Blumer would most definitely have come to a wider and quite different set of conclusions had he approached his participants as collaborators in rather than objects of study, for instance, and had he read their responses with an open mind rather than in a mindset intent on identifying causal effects on participants' conduct.

THE MIDDLE OF THE CENTURY

By the 1940s, media theorists and critics seemed increasingly wary of mass communications forms; Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton epitomized such concerns in their argument that ‘increasing dosages of mass communications may be inadvertently transforming the energies of men [sic] from active participation into passive knowledge’ (469). It is important to note, though, that these theorists do not simply *assume* that media audience members are necessarily “passive;” rather, they felt that what *had* been an arena of active participation was evolving into an arena in which ‘passive knowledge’ was passed to previously active individuals. This may not excuse Lazarsfeld and Merton from the often problematic assumptions they make about the nature of experienter-media relations. What it *does* do, however, is remind us not only of the historical specificity of the media experiencers they research and/or theorize, but of their awareness that this in itself is an important issue⁸.

Certainly, too, we should acknowledge that using psychoanalytic theory in film studies is no more an innovation of the 1970s than is using ethnographic method to study aspects of our own culture. While “effects” research has been and remains dominant in the areas of mass media and communications studies, psychoanalytic theory was taken up in and by film criticism as early as the 1940s. In fact, as Frank Krutnik points out, ‘[b]y 1947 Parker Tyler could claim with breezy confidence that ‘psychoanalysis is now part of the social texture’, and by the end of the decade film criticism had not only paid heed to this psychoanalytic trend within Hollywood but was itself showing a marked Freudian influence’ (46). In this context, it is unsurprising that early film theory was also influenced by psychoanalysis - leading for example to the publication of Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites’s 1950 study of films and their experiencers.

Wolfenstein & Leites’s *Movies: A Psychological Study*

Wolfenstein and Leites’s study provides a useful example of how psychoanalysis was taken up in and by film theory. It is interesting to consider not only in its own right but also when investigating the status and development of psychoanalytic theory in the history of film studies.

⁸ This serves as a reminder that we should not necessarily assume a superior position vis-à-vis reflexivity and context-awareness that contemporary theorists are often wont to do. If no theory can claim to be applicable outside of its historical (and culturally specific) milieux, we should perhaps not be quite so quick to judge as we tend to be: The fact is that people change over time, their relations with media presumably do also, and we need to acknowledge this not only when engaging in our own research projects but when evaluating those carried out by people distant from us in time.

Two central, interrelated aims inform Wolfenstein and Leites's study. First, they wish to investigate 'what are the recurrent day-dreams which enter into the consciousness of millions of movie-goers,' having asserted that films provide "legitimate" daydreams in a culture where daydreaming is looked down on, and that '[t]he common day-dreams of a culture are in part the sources, in part the product of its myths, stories, plays and films' (13). Second, they are concerned to compare US films⁹ and daydreams to those produced in Britain and France during the same time period (Wolfenstein and Leites 15-16). In both instances they focus on ways in which films handle the themes of love, familial relations, violence, as well as 'onlookers' and 'looked at' (16). They focus on 1940s melodramas, with special emphasis on US-produced A films made between September 1945 and January 1948.

Wolfenstein and Leites set out to investigate 'day-dreams' rather than information from polls with the explicit aim of revealing the film-going public's 'deeper-lying, less articulate aspirations, fears and wishes' which cannot be unearthed in the mere (conscious) 'samplings of opinions' that they describe as increasingly common (11). In this way the study shares considerable ground with 1970s' and contemporary film theory's desire to spurn "empirical" work. Wolfenstein and Leites's emphasis on the *shared* nature of the daydreams they investigate also underscores their intent to undertake a cultural rather than aesthetic or simply psychological study. This concern with culture is evident from their references to the anthropological work of Margaret Mead and Otto Rank, too, and from their attempts to draw direct links between what is shown in films and what is theorized by Mead and others as happening in "real" American life. Interestingly, then, Wolfenstein and Leites seem to be trying to marry up psychoanalytic and ethnographic theory in 1950, even though this is generally seen as an innovation of the 1980s and 1990s.

Despite their rejection of audience 'polling,' Wolfenstein and Leites give the distinct impression of being grounded in a scientific methodology. They use psychological findings to analyze films, and use numerous sets of data and statistics from films to

⁹ Wolfenstein and Leites actually refer consistently to the United States as "America" throughout their book. They are, however, referring solely to the US (and not to Canada or any part of South America). I will therefore refer to the US where they refer to "America," but will of course quote them accurately.

support many of their claims and add a “scientific” feel to their study¹⁰. The use of statistics is not Wolfenstein and Leites’s only allusion to empirical or scientific validity. As with Blumer’s study, the whole tone is more descriptive than critical or evaluative, and implies an “objectivity” which is as suspect here as in Blumer’s and other studies. This seems particularly odd when compared to more recent uses of psychoanalysis in film theory – where quantitative measures of any sort are absent because any use of “empirical” data is derided.

Wolfenstein and Leites’s conclusions focus on their claims that projection and denial are central to US film fantasies (299). Their use of a mixture of psychoanalytic theory and quantitative data to reach these conclusions is extremely interesting, if equally problematic. Certainly their use of the former seems to epitomize the rather ‘vulgarized psychoanalytic knowledge’ (Krutnik 46) that Krutnik claims was widespread in the 1940s. Wolfenstein and Leites, though, explain their methodology in an appendix entitled “Note on Data and Interpretation.” In this section, they explain that many of the ‘statements’ they make throughout their study involve ‘guesses about the psychological processes of movie makers and audiences to account for the emotional significance of recurrent themes’ (304).¹¹ They recognize that ‘such statements are obviously less confirmed than our statements about manifest plot constellations,’ and suggest that ‘[r]esearch into the psychological processes of movie makers and audiences ... would be required to validate them’ (305), although they don’t elaborate on how this might be achieved. The authors also try to justify the ‘statements’ in their study that rest on ‘certain assumptions about real life patterns in American culture and attempted to connect them with some of the movie themes and their emotional bases’ (305). Their uncertainty about the validity of such claims is underlined when they continue by writing that ‘[t]his class of statements, containing the greatest number of hypothetical connections, is the least confirmed’ (305), and making it clear that ‘we should not expect the relation between movies and real life to one of simple correspondence’ (306). Such qualifications, though – especially located in an appendix – do not absolve them from the problems they identify. In essence, it is clear that the study suffers from an apparent conflation of psychoanalytic theory and practice, and a parallel conflation of “real life” and its textual representations. These

¹⁰ For instance, they provide percentages of how many heterosexual romances in the films studied end happily, and how many do not (98-99) and give percentages of what types of family relations appear with what frequency in different groups of films (101-102).

¹¹ The ‘recurrent themes,’ of course, are problematically identified as significant *because* of their ‘frequency’ as opposed to any other criteria, belying again the reliance of Wolfenstein and Leites’s epistemology on quantitative, quasi-scientific methods.

conflations are of a greater degree and significance than Wolfenstein and Leites – and, arguably, contemporary psychoanalytic film theorists – are willing to acknowledge.

Despite these problems, Wolfenstein and Leites's study does at least have the advantage of *questioning* the appropriateness and usefulness of psychoanalytic theory in studying film and film watchers. This is certainly something lacking in psychoanalytic film theory from the 1970s to the present day, as I discuss below, and as Stacey and others point out in their attempts to articulate alternative ways to understand and theorize films and their watchers with or without the use of psychoanalytic theory.

Despite the number of critics influenced by Freudian notions and the work of theorists such as Wolfenstein and Leites, it is still accurate to assert that from the 1940s to the 1960s, television and other media research was dominated by audience studies (rather than textual analysis) - and primarily by audience studies using the "effects" approach. Studies in the "effects" vein aimed to identify and illustrate direct links between what experiencers see on mass media screens and how they act in real life, with particular interest in how messages affected experiencers' politics and their propensity to be violent. Such an approach has since been widely criticized as unfairly and inaccurately characterizing film experiencers as passive, zombie-like entities, but theorists from Jean Baudrillard to psychology department "effects" researchers continue to characterize media experiencers in such a way to this day.

THE "SPECTATOR" OF FILM THEORY

Whilst approaches to film experiencers using theories and methods based explicitly on the "effects" model are uncommon in film theory after the 1970s, I would argue that most areas of film theory retain significant remnants of the "effects" approach in their characterizations of film experiencers, whether or not they explicitly invoke notions of the "spectator." And while psychoanalytically inspired film theory has been particularly guilty of such a text-centred approach, arguably any theory that focuses heavily on the film "text" at the expense of considering its context implies a film experiencer is somewhat like the zombie-viewer of "effects" theory and research.

The spectre of “effects” is not the only problem with film theory’s dominant conceptualizations of the “spectator,” nor is it the most widely criticized one. The primary motivation for film theorists to challenge theories of spectatorship and move toward reception work stem from roots in cultural studies that ‘challenge the overtly abstract definition of reception that characterizes theories of the apparatus’ (Mayne 1993: 62). While this move – and its impact on film criticism – is the focal concern of this chapter, film theory was not alone in its shift towards an abstracted, ideal “spectator” at this time. Citing the passage from John Berger’s book on art history reproduced below, Linda Williams suggests that it ‘could stand as the earliest and most accessible single statement of a whole generation’s turn toward a commentary on a hypothetical spectator’s relation to the visual image’ (1):

In the average European oil painting of the nude, the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to be the result of his being there. It is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity. But he, by definition, is a stranger with his clothes still on (cited Williams 1).

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE “SPECTATOR”

Some commentators (cf. Moores) assert that Hall’s encoding/ decoding model emerged in direct response to the development of “Screen” theory, although Hall himself explains how he created it primarily as a direct challenge to the ‘traditional, empirical, positivistic models of content analysis, audience effects research, etc’ used by those at the Centre for Mass Communications Research at the University of Leicester attending the colloquium at which he presented the original paper (Hall 1994: 253). Whatever the specific context, Hall’s model emerged at an important moment in the history of the field of “audience” work. Following this, research was undertaken by Morley and Brunsdon, and later by Hobson and others, to study media experiencers from the perspective offered by the encoding/decoding model. While Morley found, ultimately, that the model doesn’t really *work* (1981), its very existence nevertheless opened up new areas of enquiry and debate, and could reasonably be regarded as initiating cultural studies’s journey towards more ethnographically-based work on the “audience.” Meanwhile, though, the vast majority of “audience” research - and very nearly *all* research acknowledged by funding bodies and the press – continued to work within the tradition of “effects.” And film theory did not at this time take up or engage much with models proposed by cultural studies, developing instead theories of spectatorship implied and inspired by apparatus theory and the work of writers such as Laura Mulvey, Stephen Heath and Christian Metz.

Developments in spectatorship studies

The position put forward in Mulvey's now infamous 1975 article, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema" is widely known, and need not be explained here. Equally, a number and range of developments of the claims and notions of such a position are well known and, as Linda Williams writes:

[i]t was perhaps predictable that historically grounded studies of cinematic reception, along with cultural studies aimed at delineating the complex interactions between audiences and texts, would challenge some of the foregoing notions [of Mulvey]. The variable experiences of actual viewers, who are in possession of many more "ways of seeing" than Berger, Metz, Mulvey, or Baudry could have imagined, have recently challenged a more monolithic account of the "gaze" (3).

Williams writes this in her introduction to a 1994 collection of essays 'dedicated to the proposition that many of the insights into what I am calling gaze studies are still relevant to film studies' since '[n]o amount of empirical research into the sociology of actual audiences will displace the desire to speculate about the effects of visual culture, and especially moving images, on hypothetical viewing subjects' (4). While I would not reject out of hand Williams's first claim here, the second claim she makes is to my mind deeply problematic. First, I am not *entirely* convinced that the 'desire' to which she refers is so utterly unshakeable: Were a considerable number and range of 'empirical' studies made of film and other media experiencers, maybe the desire to hypothesize about hypothetical "spectators" would indeed be annulled – or at least dulled considerably. More importantly, though, I am concerned by the way in which Williams here suggests that, somehow, engaging in 'empirical' work with 'actual audiences' necessarily excludes hypothesis and speculation about the process of watching (or rather experiencing) a film. The point she misses is that far from foreclosing or ending speculation about experiencer-media relations, empirical work with actual experiencers changes the grounds from and on which theorists might theorize. This blindness to the potential of 'empirical' work with experiencers seems to be based on (or conducive to) a poor understanding of what so-called empirical work with experiencers involves and might aim for; it also seems typical of theorists who inexplicably insist on a theory/empirical binary that evidently does *not* have to be part of work that engages with as well as speculates about film experiencers. My case study, for example, does *not* simply 'present' my empirical data in a theoretical vacuum, nor do studies by other researchers who have produced accounts of media experiencers. Indeed the argument from ethnography has been for some time that it is *not possible* – let alone desirable – to describe without interpreting participant or

other experiences and that interpretation already requires *some* kind of theoretical framework (however elaborate or simple, and whether acknowledged or not). At the same time, Williams is hardly the only one at fault here; a number of reception theorists, after all, *do* suggest that description is their goal.¹² These, though, do not in themselves explain Williams's misrepresentation of what much reception work achieves in terms of theorizing film experiences and experiencers. And I certainly think writers such as Williams over-exaggerate the gap between what reception and other experienter studies *do* and what spectatorship studies claims to do. Theorists in all these areas theorize people who experience films, even if they are working with often very different information on which to base their theories.

In some ways it is unsurprising that film theorists so inadequately characterize those engaged in empirical "audience" work. For one thing, it is likely that they rely heavily on 'overviews' of the field with which Gray takes issue when trying to establish what exactly "reception" and "ethnographic" researchers *do*. This fits with the distanced, hypothesizing mode of speculation in which spectatorship theory engages. Also, though, such lack of understanding is perhaps less surprising given the confusions *within* the field, compounded by the fact that '[t]he ethnographic approach to the audience has been more of a horizon of research in film studies than an actual practice' (Mayne 1993: 59). Although Mayne wrote this in 1993, it pretty much applies today, as is evidenced by the somewhat limited range of film experienter studies to which I can refer.

With an eye on the decidedly problematic and inadequate ways in which "audience" work is regularly characterized by film theorists, I would like to investigate how film theorists *have* responded to criticisms that however much the 'implied spectator position' of film theory 'functioned as something of a phantom, and not a person to be confused with real viewers, it nonetheless managed to marginalize any consideration of how real viewers might view films in ways considerably more various than any monolithic conception of the cinematic apparatus could imply' (Mayne 1993: 80).

Citing her own and Mary Anne Doane's work on melodrama (Williams 1984; Doane 1987), Miriam Hansen's on female spectatorship (1986) and Tania Modleski's on Hitchcock and feminist theory (1988), Williams outlines ways in which although feminists 'were uncomfortable with such a totalizing concept' as the "male gaze" of

¹² Hill, for instance, claims that her book about "violent" films presents 'un-theorized' data' as 'raw material for future research' (Hill 103) – a problematic assertion that I discuss elsewhere.

classical cinema and as a result 'began to seek exceptions to the dominance of the gaze – originally in "women's films" and more recently in horror films – the very notion that such works *were* exceptions to the dominance of the gaze left the totalizing concept intact' (2). In contrast, though, Williams accords 'contemporary discussions of spectatorship' (such as Berenstein's and Clover's) a genuine ability to 'emphasize the plurality and paradoxes of many different, historically distinct viewing positions' (3-4). While this might be true, it seems to me that much of this 'new' theorizing in spectatorship studies simply fails to address the *still-present* problem that its text-centrism, 'in assuming powerful, subconscious effects, collaps[es] the discursive subject anticipated by the text with the concrete social subject interpreting the text' (Jensen 136).

In addition, Williams's argument seems again to miss the point of much work on media experiencers when she anyway complains that '[t]he issue that now faces the once influential subfield of spectatorship within cinema – and indeed all visual – studies is whether it is still possible to maintain a theoretical grasp of the relations between moving images and viewers without succumbing to an anything-goes pluralism' (4). The suggestion here that acknowledging the importance of and interacting with actual film experiencers will lead to an 'anything-goes pluralism' is peculiar, to say the least. It seems to assume, for a start, that film experiencers not only theoretically can but actually do interpret films in ways that are not shaped at all by socio-historical and other identifiable contextual factors – an assumption clearly exploded by reception theorists such as Klinger, Staiger, and Stacey. Klinger, after all, is centrally concerned to argue that 'diverse positions of viewing are encouraged by social and intertextual agencies within mass culture – agencies seeking to structure reception beyond textual boundaries, *keeping it within the dominant ideology*' (Klinger 1989: 118, my emphasis), while Stacey and Staiger are both concerned to investigate precisely the ways in which film experiencer interpretations of films are varied but limited according to their historical location and other specificities. Similarly, more recent theorists such as Austin, Barker, Brooks and myself are interested in showing that while multiple interpretations of films do circulate simultaneously, interpretations actually realized are far from limitless.

Another way in which film experiencer work is regularly misrepresented by theorists of spectatorship is exemplified in Mayne's assertion that

[i]f the "subject" as theorized by apparatus studies is "passive" and "constructed," the argument seems to go, then the "audience" will be just the opposite – active sites of agency and struggle (1993: 62).

Here again, while some reception theorists are guilty of making this simplistic argument, it is more often “overviews” of the field that attribute such a position to audience researchers. Certainly theorists from Klinger to Ang to Barker and Brooks have provided strong challenges to the idea of the “active” audience. Klinger and Ang, for instance, both highlight ways in which watcher activity is curtailed, while Barker and Brooks identify the notion as a ‘defence mechanism’ against hyperdermic “effects” theories and contribute to as well as support studies that ‘talk instead of kinds and degrees of activity,’ and that ‘decoupl[e] the idea of ‘activity’ and ‘passivity’ from any implications about degrees of influence’ (234).

Another challenge to spectatorship studies concerns its visualist bias – as evident in its choice of words. Williams refers repeatedly to film as (part of) ‘visual’ culture, completely eliding other ways in which it is experienced – something that engaging in actual experienter research forces a theorist to reject. Her vocabulary and the bias it betrays is shared by other contributors to the volume she edits, itself tellingly entitled *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film* – where the emphasis is very much on passive terminology (it is not, for example, titled “*Watching* Films” or subtitled “*Ways of Experiencing* Film”). The title of Mulvey’s article betrays the roots of such a bias, too – and additionally indicates the bias towards *narrative* (rather than other aspects of film experience) so evident and so problematic in film theory and criticism. I discuss the extent of the problems thrown up by such a bias in more detail in Chapter 3; for now I just point to its existence and the lack of engagement with real film experiencers that, if it doesn’t *cause* such a blind-spot, certainly prevents it from being adequately acknowledged or addressed. I also refer again to Barker and Brooks’s reference to Baxandall’s argument that ‘just because film is *visual* in its medium, does not mean that *our encounter* with it is primarily to do with a *way of seeing*’ (1998a: 136)¹³.

It is also worth noting that Williams and other spectator theorists refer to the “effects” of the moving images and narratives they theorize. This again suggests the extent to which such theorists are caught up in the “effects” tradition despite their ostensive differences. As in that tradition, theories of spectatorship assume they are studying how texts influence spectators rather than considering and investigating other possible

¹³ This reference takes on additional significance in the context of debating a position in film theory based in considerable part upon the work of another art historian - revealing that just as film theorists’ ideas about the status of film as a primarily visual experience differ, so do art historians’ ideas about experiences of visual culture.

experiencer-media relations – relations that become evident to researchers who actually engage with film experiencers rather than rely on speculation about them.

Another issue of pertinence to discussing the relationship between actual film experiencer and hypothetical spectator work is what Mayne identifies as ‘the gap between *address* and *reception*’ (1994: 157), since this of course reflects the gap between spectatorship and reception studies. This gap – between the hypothetical space inhabited by the spectator and those inhabited by actual experiencers – has been opened up, says Mayne, by spectatorship studies that investigate the gap ‘between the ways in which texts construct viewers and how those texts may be read or used in ways that depart from what the institution valorizes’ (1994: 159). It is in this light Mayne argues that ‘apparatus theories are not completely wrong, but rather incomplete’ since it is one thing to assume that ‘the various institutions of the cinema *do* project an ideal viewer, and another thing to assume that these projections *work*’ (1994: 159). In many ways I am keen to embrace this position, since it seems to allow for a productive interaction between textual and experiencer studies. However, I am *not* convinced that the ‘institutions of the cinema’ project an ideal spectator around and between which “real” experiencers should be analyzed. The mere fact that theorists working within the same paradigm of identifying the ideal “spectator” generated by a text – most often psychoanalytic theory – regularly disagree about the precise nature of that construct strongly suggests that there is at least as much “projection” by film theorists working within this paradigm as there is at work in extrapolations from empirical experiencer work by writers such as Radway and McRobbie (both of whom Mayne cites).

Mayne identifies ‘[t]he major problem in Radway’s analysis’ as being that ‘for all of the criticism offered of theoretical models which ignore real readers in favor of the critic’s own projections, there is a fair share of projection and idealization going on here as well’ - arguing that the women Radway discusses are projections of ‘American, middle-class, academic feminism’ as much as actual readers of romances (Mayne 1994: 162). Mayne continues by noting that

the desire to name real readers is neither transparent nor innocent, for the women readers who appear in Radway’s analysis are mediated by her questions, her analyses, and her narrative. It is inevitable that such projections exist in this kind of analysis, and unless those projections are analyzed, we are left with an ideal reader who seems more real because she is quoted and referred to, but who is every bit as problematic as the ideal reader constructed by abstract theories of an apparatus positioning passive vessels (162).

Mayne's point that 'the women readers' who appear in Radway's analysis are 'mediated by her questions, her analyses, and her narrative' is of course correct. However, it is in an attempt to address such concerns that so many interested in film experienter work are looking to ethnography for theoretical as well as methodological guidance. The aim is precisely to analyze such "projections" (although such a pointedly psychoanalytic term is rarely used). The rigorous development of media experienter work in media and cultural studies as well as film studies - often drawing on ethnographic theory and criticism - works precisely to address the problem of empirical research leaving us with little more than 'an ideal reader who seems more real because she is quoted and referred to;' while recognizing Mayne's concerns here as valid, then, and agreeing that much remains to be done to address them, I am not as happy to go along with the conclusion Mayne draws that the experienter quoted and referred to is '*every bit* as problematic as the ideal reader constructed by abstract theories of an apparatus positioning passive vessels' (ibid., my italics). This conclusion seems somewhat disingenuous: To point out the need to address decidedly complex issues of presenting actual experiencers via an author who inevitably shapes both the information gathered from experiencers and the ways in which it is reported as well as interpreted is one thing; to imply that these problems render the experiencers cited in such projects as much "ideal" spectators as those constructed entirely from theorists' extrapolations from textual analysis (and sociological assumption) is quite another claim altogether – and, to my mind, a far less convincing one.

Mayne's conclusions also seem to rest rather heavily on her critique of just one researcher's approach to studying "actual readers," which also problematizes it as a critique of the field of empirical experienter work as a whole. Radway herself, after all, retrospectively acknowledges the flaws in her study of the romance (Radway 1988), as do many other researchers who recognize that '[t]he study of the audience is not politically innocent; it forces us to consider the power structures that shape social reality' (Lewis 42). In fact, Ang attacks Radway along the same lines as Mayne attacks reception theorists, arguing that Radway's tendency 'to overlook the constructivist aspect of her own enterprise' is particularly problematic (Ang 1996: 101). This is exacerbated, according to Ang, by Radway's 'feminist desire' to 'rais[e] the consciousness of romance reading women' (ibid. 103), and causes her to miss any

account of the '*pleasurableness* of the pleasure of romance reading' in her 'functionalist explanation' (Ibid. 104)¹⁴.

Having established some of the key criticisms made by spectatorship theorists in film studies, I next summarize my response to such critiques and move on – first to a discussion of recent studies of film experiencers; second to how ethnographic theories and methods might be implemented to address concerns raised by problems in and by recent film and other media experiencer studies; and finally to set out my case study with such issues in mind.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE “SPECTATOR”

While I want to reject neither the insights of textual analysis in general, nor all of those from spectatorship studies in particular, I *do* reject the notion that one *needs* to talk about abstracted, hypothetical experiencers to theorize usefully and convincingly about the processes of experiencing films or other cultural forms. I believe, rather, that working with insights gained from asking questions of and interacting with *actual* experiencers inevitably renders theories about the experiencers - and experiences – of films more grounded in reality, and thus more inclined to be accessible to actual experiencers *and* open to useful challenge, validation, expansion or modification by other theorists and their work with experiencers and/or theory. I would also suggest that film theory be open to the possibility that apparatus theory is *not* necessarily correct to assume that 'the various institutions of the cinema *do* project an ideal viewer,' but that if they do not neither are we necessarily consigned to some sort of 'anything-goes pluralism' (Williams) in our theories and hypotheses about experiencer-media relations and experiences. This is because I think it entirely possible that perhaps the cinematic apparatus is not the root of the homogeneity that so much film

¹⁴ While I feel Ang's criticisms of Radway are valid in themselves, I do take issue with the tone she takes and with her problematic either/or approach: While her arguments about an "alternative" reading to Radway's are well founded, Ang seems strangely blinkered to the possibility that her position and Radway's are mutually informing rather than mutually exclusive. (Specifically, she assumes her arguments about a 'politics of fantasy' (106) refute rather than modify and complicate Radway's 'politics of compensation.') Especially given her prior comments about the political, epistemological and ethical ramifications of *choice* (78 *et passim*), I find her critique of Radway remarkably lacking in reflexivity, let alone an analytical rigor that would *at least* problematize the way in which she rejects Radway's position outright by asserting what is important and what is not. Also, phrases such as 'leaving apart what its [fantasy reading's] ideological consequences in social reality' seem incommensurate with her prior claims that audience work should be critical, is always political, and that ethnographic particularity and sensitivity can be useful in this essentially constructive endeavour.

theory assumes it is, and nor are actual media experiencers the site of such excessive heterogeneity as so many assume they are. That is, I would suggest the dominance of the “male gaze” is *not* instituted by the apparatus of the cinema, but is an extrapolation made by film theorists working within a certain limited understanding of ways in which experiencers can and do experience films etcetera within patriarchal cultures: The so-called “textual constructs” – and constraints – imposed on experiencers are rather *contextual*, and have to do with the way experiencers experience the text *as a social process* rather than they do with the text itself constructing such a position¹⁵.

In this way, I *would* perhaps go so far as ‘to define texts as offering only the positions that viewers create for them and thereby to mediate *any* notion of the cinematic institution out of existence,’ replacing the role here of the “cinematic institution” with that of a wider social process/institution. As such I *don’t* agree with Mayne that seeing ‘texts as offering only the positions that [experiencers] create for them’ necessarily ‘substitutes one monolithic political notion for another’ (1994: 159); in claiming this I think Mayne misses the point that in disavowing the power of the *cinema-as-institution*, one does not necessarily simultaneously disavow ‘*any* power of institutions and conceptualiz[e] readers/viewers as completely free and autonomous agents’ (Mayne 1994: 159).

More generally, I hold that film theory’s foreclosing of and persistent focus on film as a *visual* media form is neither effective nor appropriate. Further, I suggest that film theory might have acknowledged and addressed this problem some time ago had it actually consulted actual people who experience films instead of hypothesizing about them in terms of “spectatorship” constructed by only the visual and narrative aspects of filmic texts. There is evidence that people experience films in multi-sensual ways not only in studies like mine, Hill’s, and Barker and Brooks’s, but in the fairly simple fact that ‘if you talk with people you find that media experiences are almost always multi-sensual’ (Barker 188). Overall, despite my own interest in theories of spectatorship and textual analysis, I am not ultimately convinced that a film theory informed primarily by such notions can ‘throw light on what real, concrete audiences

¹⁵ This point underscores the importance of recognizing that while meaning is, theoretically, endless and open, it is also historically fixed and limited. Equally, it underscores the importance of recognizing that ‘[a]udience research allows us to see how ambiguity is frozen by time or place;’ that ‘[a]s students of contemporary culture, we must acknowledge its potential but explain its fixity’ (Lewis 57); and that film experiencer work must keep these aims and possibilities firmly in mind when developing new theories and methods.

do and say with their media' – and, as I indicate above, I believe that film theorists' accounts *should* be assessed at least in part on their ability to do just that (Barker 190). As such, I think film theory needs in particular to think long and hard about how *and why* its languages of analysis and interpretation 'are so antithetical to those experiences' of actual film experiencers (Barker 185).

Of all the ways in which spectatorship theory is problematic, though, I find the most worrying revolve around its complicity in the "effects" tradition. As earlier quotation from Williams shows, spectatorship theory assumes that experiencers are *effected* by what they *see* [sic]. In this context, I think Barker is correct to point out the complicity of spectatorship theories and studies in the dominant "effects" tradition that serves us when 'we wish to impute possible persuasive influences to *other people* by virtue of *our* seeing implications in a film which we don't like' (187). While film theorists are very far from being the only set of researchers interested in experiencer-media relations in this way, that does not make them any less guilty of participating in such a move. And as I discuss below, that participation is not of pertinence *only* within the rarefied milieux of academia. Theoretical assumptions about experiencers and media "effects" help shape and sustain such views in the popular press – especially in the areas of film criticism and policy debate. Even more problematically, these ideas seep into popular consciousness and render many film experiencers embarrassed, guarded and extremely self-critical about their enjoyment of certain films deemed unsophisticated or even "harmful" by those with more cultural capital. This means many experiencers end up 'mock[ing] themselves, diminishing their own pleasures and interests, and doubting their own intellects' (Barker and Brooks 298), and allows a whole host of other experiencers to condemn, often without watching, films they don't like and with them 'the people who like such films' (Barker and Brooks 297). Given the tendency to blame real-life delinquency and violence on films and viewing choices rather than on real material and socio-cultural conditions, I find this particularly important as well as particularly disturbing to consider and address.

FROM THE "SPECTATOR" TO THE "VIEWER"

For her 1992 study of modern horror films, Carol J. Clover 'polled some sixty employees of rental outlets... about the clientele for certain films' and tells us that they 'confirm to a person the young male bias' (6). While using some degree of "empirical" work to identify film experiencers pertinent to her study, though, Clover excludes

experiencers of the film she is analyzing who are *not* young males. Recognizing this herself, she writes that her ‘interest in the male viewer’s stake in horror spectatorship is such that I have consigned to virtual invisibility all other members of the audience, despite the fact that their loyalty and engagement can be just as ardent and their stake in the genre just as deserving of attention,’ but defends her decision on the grounds that her book is simply ‘not about horror audiences’ (7).

Given Clover’s insistence on theorizing only one type of horror film watcher, her acknowledgement that that other watchers exist and her “empirical” work in video stores seems somewhat peripheral. Certainly her study does not cite actual watchers; her only reason for engaging in any watcher research at all seems to be to compensate for the lack of reliable industry data on horror film audiences. While Clover’s study is fascinating, then, it and other studies that focus on particular but still hypothetical watchers do nothing to incorporate an awareness of actual film experiencer experiences and interpretations into film or “spectatorship” analyses.

In contrast, Stacey’s 1994 study of female experiencers of Hollywood films and stars of the 1940s and 1950s, along with Austin’s 1999 study of straight male experiencers of *Basic Instinct*, do consult and cite actual experiencers to inform their analyses. Both theorists send letters to popular magazines requesting questionnaire respondents and/or, in Stacey’s case, letters from readers. (In the event, Austin also received letters as well as questionnaire responses.) Interestingly, Stacey used material from the letters she received to compile the questionnaire she sent out, so that ‘the material from respondents generated the structure and content of the questionnaire’ (60); this not only addresses in part the problems of agenda-setting and leading questions so often faced by “audience” and other researchers, but also indicates her willingness to tailor her research tools to her informants’ input and interests. This is an attitude I found helpful when designing my own research (as I discuss further in the next chapter and Part III).

Unlike Clover, then, Stacey and Austin cite actual film experiencers in their studies, often directly quoting large chunks of letters and/or questionnaire responses to illustrate as well as bring up points. Like Clover, though, both Stacey and Austin utilize aspects of established film theory – including psychoanalytic theory – to make sense of their data. In this way they all remain firmly rooted in traditional film theory – and while they bring a new awareness of what actual watchers experience to their analyses, they do not query the appropriateness of psychoanalytic concepts such as

“identification” to analyze their data. In contrast, studies by Hill and Barker and Brooks both try to work with and theorize film experiencers in quite different ways, eschewing psychoanalytic theory and challenging the pertinence of concepts such as “identification” to film theory. In each case, too, group interviews are used by the researchers, and the resultant texts are analyzed not with the help of psychoanalysis but in other ways, including discourse analysis.

While I do not discuss and critique all these and other pertinent studies, I do look more thoroughly at Hill’s book and also comment on Barker and Brooks’s use and presentation of interview data. I look at these two studies rather than any others because they, like me, use interviews as their main source of film experiencer data.

ANNETTE HILL & “VIEWING VIOLENT MOVIES”

In her 1997 book, *Shocking Entertainment: Viewer Responses to Violent Movies*, Hill researches ‘emotional responses to violent movies, not behavioural effects’ (2), as I mention above. One of her main concerns is to challenge ways in which ‘[a]ll too often, viewers of violent movies are demonized’ (3), and she asserts right from the start that ‘there are more productive ways to debate screen violence’ and useful and productive ‘areas of investigation other than the cause-effect debate’ (1). The central question of her research is ‘why do we wish to see violent movies?’ (1), and early on she identifies her key finding that the film experiencer ‘is able to differentiate between fictional violence and real violence in a way that indicates real violence is perceived as disturbing and abhorrent,’ citing several other studies to further substantiate her position.

In designing the study to ‘learn why people choose to watch violent movies’ (7), Hill draws her research models ‘from media and cultural studies, not from film theory, or psychological ‘effects’ research’ (8). She chooses to use ‘focus groups’ of four to six participants (seven in one case) rather than questionnaires or individual interviews. She rejects questionnaires on the grounds that ‘[f]or the purposes of this study, questionnaire response would only be useful if conducted on a large scale’ which was ‘not possible’ (8), and explains her use of focus groups rather than individual interviews because she feels the latter ‘lacked an interaction of ideas, and over time I came to recognize this interaction as necessary [sic] to understanding the process of viewing violence, an activity which is more social than individual’ (8).

As is typical of reception studies, Hill makes quite plain that '[t]he sample used in this research does not constitute a representative survey' (13). Despite this, she tried to recruit men and women (over 18s only) in equal numbers - on the grounds that

this study ... is to examine why people watch violent movies: 'people' includes male and female customers, a fact often overlooked when considering the role of the consumer and violent movies (13).

She ends up with twenty male and sixteen female participants. Of her 36 participants aged between 18 and 50, ten were 18-20; sixteen were 20-30; nine were 30-40; and just one was over 40 years of age (14-15). Only three were of non-'British' ethnicity (15). All participants were educated to 'GCSE/A'level standard, with 21 participants having finished a technical or vocational course or art of a university course and three participants who had completed a postgraduate course' (Hill 15). Referring to CAA profiles of moviegoers for the focal films Hill points out their figures reveal 'that the target films are more popular with middle class (educated) moviegoers, although some films, such as *Reservoir Dogs*, attract similar figures from both social brackets [i.e., C2DE as well as ABC1]' (15). The focus groups – six in all – 'were conducted at The Green Door Café in London' with the aim of providing 'a neutral, safe environment for participants who were being asked to consider a sensitive issue' (15).

Participants were asked to provide brief autobiographical information and express their 'initial reactions' to the target films; this was followed up by 'a more focused, discussion guided by a series of questions posed by [Hill], acting as moderator' – a discussion that incorporated 'three clips,' that is, 'a list of target films [*Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *True Romance*, *Natural Born Killers*, *Man Bites Dog*, *Henry*, *Portrait of a Serial Killer*, *Bad Lieutenant*, and *Killing Zoe*], a scene from... *Reservoir Dogs*, and a scene from ... *Henry*' (16). A (male) 'assistant moderator' was in attendance (and is described by Hill as 'a significant means of relaxing male participants and engaging informal discussion' (16-17)), as was audio-recording equipment. As in my study, [p]reliminary readings of transcripts assessed emergent themes and useful categories for analysis' (17). Hill cites individual informants, as I do, but does not name them so as 'to best represent group comments as a whole and not to single out individual participants unless a specific point is made regarding an individual's response' (17). Also, despite her stated aim to 'examine whether there is any noticeable difference between the way men and women view violence' (13), she does not identify participants 'as male or female unless the data analysis is directly concerned with gender issues' since 'the *first* object of this study is to examine the process of viewing violence' (17). In writing up her study Hill focuses on physical and emotional

responses to the films on her list; looks at ways in which participants build character relationships rather than identify with individual characters; focuses on “thresholds and self-censorship;” and looks at the issue of “entertainment” with a case study using the infamous ear-slicing scene from *Reservoir Dogs*.

My aim here is not to present all of Hill’s “findings” and conclusions – her book does that extremely clearly. Rather, I comment on how she conducts her study, and reaches and articulates her conclusions, focusing on aspects of pertinence to “reception” work as well as to my own project. Certainly Hill’s project enters into contemporary debates in film theory around the differences (potential and actual) between conclusions drawn about film experiencers from studies of actual experiencers and those of hypothetical spectators. And it answers calls to move “beyond” the “effects” tradition and debate. It is also important because it is one of very few *actual* studies of real film experiencers carried out by a film theorist, exemplifying “reception analysis” more generally by ‘[d]rawing its theory from the humanities and its methodology from the social sciences’ (Jensen 135). And of particular importance for me is Hill’s choice to focus on films that while in many ways are unlike those I focus on, do raise similar issues about how those who watch “violent” films are so often dramatized as “violent” and/or “dumb” (cf. Tasker).

What are “violent movies”?

Despite many interesting and convincing claims, the key problem with Hill’s study is her decidedly unproblematized use of the terms “violent” and “violence,” even given her discussion of those very terms. Throughout the study I am left with no satisfactory answer to what exactly “violence” *means* for Hill and her participants, and not only who defines the target films as well as other films as “violent,” but why this label is so widely used and accepted. Hill tells us that

the term ‘violent movies’ is used to refer to societal/cultural consensus of the target films. Care was taken in the focus groups not to introduce the terms ‘violent movies’ or ‘desensitization’ until participants had done so of their own accord (11).

As a result, she argues, she uses the terms ‘violent movies’ and ‘viewing violence..... to accurately reflect the content of the discussion groups and participants’ responses to the target films’ (12). There is no reason to doubt such care was taken in the focus groups, but it is also necessary to indicate that such terms were used neither in the posters nor other techniques used to elicit participants (or explain why this was not the case). In addition, more reflexivity about the terms and their apparently widely accepted use would be helpful. Hill does not comment at all, for instance, on why the

list of target films might reasonably have lead participants to assume or speculate that she is interested in researching violence. This is especially important to acknowledge and discuss given the media's attention to the issue of "media violence" in relation to the target films, and because of widely-held beliefs and assumptions that "audience" research is about "effects," and notoriously about the "harmful" (or not) effects of "violence." In this context I would add that it is after all precisely the "effects" tradition that Hill ostensibly rejects which 'has taken for granted that it is meaningful to talk ... of 'violence' as an abstractable category' (Barker and Brooks 1998a: 84). The fact that Hill's respondents refer to 'violent movies' is hardly surprising in such contexts; the fact that Hill doesn't reflect further than she does on their use is especially problematic since her failure to do so indicates some (unintentional) complicity in the "effects" tradition.

"Viewing violence" and the "effects" tradition

Another way in which Hill's rejection of the "effects" tradition is perhaps undermined is evident when despite emphasizing her focus on emotional response rather than behavioural effects, Hill identifies her project as 'an attempt to indicate the *positive* responses to be gained from viewing violent movies' (3, my emphasis). This, coupled with the anti-censorship, policy driven nature of her conclusions (and motives), makes me skeptical of the extent to which her study places itself outside or beyond the "effects" tradition. She seems motivated by the desire to present a case for the 'pro-social effects' (Barker and Brooks 85) of viewing 'violent movies,' – a position that *does* share an assumption that research on film experiencers is research on influence. It could, for example, be argued that Hill presents an argument against commonly-held views that 'violent movies' produce 'evil and depraved,' violent or violence-inclined viewers (3), and that on the contrary, 'violent movies' produce thoughtful, non-violent viewers. Of course Hill's argument is never quite so simple, but her lack of reflection on and discussion around the terms she accepts and the aims she has means that such a reading *is* available to critical readers of her work.

Participants

One of the reasons I was reminded of the problematic lack of attention to the terms 'violent movies' and 'violence' when re-reading Hill's study for my own project, was that while she found that participants in her research 'appeared comfortable using this term ['violent movies']' (11), I did not find this with many of the participants in my research. My experience was that non-watchers of martial arts action films are usually the ones to introduce terms such as "violent" into interviews, while the majority of

participants who *watch* the films rarely do so – and if they do they usually do in the context of how ‘other people’ (Riley) see the films. And if I introduced the term (for example in the question ‘Do you think martial arts films are especially violent?’) many of them either showed a distinct lack of comfort with the term, or again used the term as applicable to others’ perceptions of the films rather than to their own perceptions or the films themselves.

Of course the films I investigate and those used by Hill are different, and that goes a considerable way to explaining some differences in our experiences of participants’ responses to and/or uses of these terms. At the same time, the clear differentiation made by Hill and her participants between the target films of her research and ‘Hollywood action films, such as the *Die Hard* series’ (Hill 5) – still counted as ‘violent’ films – ties our projects in ways perhaps not initially evident. What I question here is not Hill’s choice of participants *per se*, but her lack of reflexivity about – even acknowledgement of – the importance of their individual as well as group characteristics in the context of the research conducted. She does not discuss their perception of the target films as ‘violent’ *yet more sophisticated* than Hollywood action films, for example, merely stating that ‘[t]hey may enjoy Hollywood action movies, but the target films are more intellectually satisfying, and more demanding of the viewer’ (26). Similarly, despite her talk of participants opting to see the target films because of the ‘cultural cachet’ associated with the ‘societal/cultural consensus declar[ing] them ... to be unacceptable’ (26), she does not address the fact that *many* who choose to watch so-called ‘violent’ films do *not* watch them for such reasons, but because they *enjoy* them (whether they be the target films of ‘new brutalism,’ martial arts action films, or others deemed ‘violent’ by critics, theorists and other film experiencers).

My concerns about such points would be considerably less significant were it not that Hill does not reflect on the extent to which she clearly shares many of the views of her participants, and that she carries out her research with clear aims of impacting policy decisions about censorship and regulation of films by bodies such as the BBFC and the ITC (113).

Put simply, if I were a policy-maker (already informed mainly by “effects” research and assumptions) and I read Hill’s report, I would find her recommendations unconvincing precisely because her focus group participants seems so narrow. My concern would be that while she convinces that studying well-educated, largely middle-class viewers of the target films might well indicate there are ‘positive responses... to violent movies’

(3) since they display a clear ability to differentiate between real and film 'violence' in the positive ways she indicates, there is little or no evidence to suggest the same might be held about less educated and/or lower class viewers, or indeed other 'violent movies' since 'Hollywood action movies' are sharply differentiated from the 'more intellectually satisfying, and more demanding of the viewer' target films (26) in which '[a]ll participants agree dialogue is significant... to their appreciation of them' (24). Such conclusions do very little to convince censors that 'violent' films as a whole should not continue to be censored, and in fact could be read as supporting already widely-held views that while more educated, more 'sophisticated' middle-class viewers might not need such censorship, regulation is still necessary because of *other*, less educated and sophisticated viewers.

The concerns I outline above bring me back to the problematic nature of the relationship between Hill's study and the "effects" debate. Again, it seems that many aspects of her study work closer to the "effects" tradition than she admits (or would like, presumably), and that this is not helped by her particular orientation to policy issues in this case. I want to move now, though, to discuss what I see as the more successful aspects of Hill's study. These are areas that I think usefully confound assumptions both of the psychological "effects" model and, in related ways, of film theory that works with notions of the "spectator" and spectatorship.

Challenging notions of "identification"

One of Hill's most convincing and important arguments is that her research provides evidence that 'identification, in the film theory sense, does not take place during the viewing of violence' (106). This finding has wider implications, of course – especially since identification, whether explicitly or not, is a notion key not only to film theory but to film critics' and others' assumptions about the "effects" of films on those who watch them.

In general terms, Hill's argument is that 'participants do not identify with any one character, but build character relationships' and '[t]hese relationships are dynamic and fluid' (39). Noting participants' physical as well as spoken responses to watching a scene from *Henry* that involves an incestuous rape, an eye-stabbing and a murder, Hill writes that 'what is apparent is that participants feel a complex range of feelings towards the characters and that these feelings fluctuate according to context, characterization, and personal opinion' (40), and, more generally, that film experiencers identify with actions or emotions, not with a character (41). These

observations challenge theories about the processes – even the existence of the processes – of identification, and thus undermines many theories about text-spectator relations. This, then, is a particularly effective example of how empirical audience work can – and should – challenge more dominant notions of film experiencers as “spectators” in film theory.

This chapter also includes points important to discussions of films that might be termed ‘violent,’ in particular. First, by showing a clip from a film and eliciting responses from both experiencers who have seen the whole film beforehand and those who’ve never seen it, Hill can suggest that ‘there is a scale of response which is comparable with a scale of understanding’ (44). In particular, she notes that ‘[p]articipants who know the film are prepared for the extreme violence in this scene and understand the motivation behind such violent acts,’ and as such respond differently to it than participants unfamiliar with the film (44). This observation and extrapolation goes some way to explaining why it might be that often participants who have either seen only segments of films under enquiry, or have seen none at all, make quite different judgments about them and their content from those made by experiencers who watch whole films from the same genre.

In addition, Hill extrapolates from participant responses to the scene from *Henry* that film experiencers use a ‘distancing technique’ (48) when watching ‘violent’ films whereby they tend to identify with the protector/aggressor rather than the victim during ‘violent’ sequences - not because they enjoy vicariously inflicting ‘violence,’ but because ‘the majority of participants wish to associate themselves with the protector not the protected’ and the aggressor rather than the victim (49). This does not imply people who watch ‘violent’ films – as many characterizations of them *do* imply – “identify” with the aggressor and/or protector because they *are* aggressive, but rather out of a sense of ‘self-preservation’ (48) that is dependent upon contextual factors rather than desires to “be” or “be like” individual characters *per se*.

Hill’s conclusions about “portfolios of interpretation”

Hill’s other crucial conclusions revolve around her observations that ‘[t]he significance of real experience emerges as central to understanding fictional violence’ (27); that film experiencers are entirely capable of distinguishing between real and fictional violence, ‘and they differentiate between real violence and fictional violence’ (where they find the latter but not the former entertaining); and that people who find ‘violent’ films entertaining do not ‘find all violence entertaining, but the process of watching a

film which is composed of acting, soundtrack, direction, dialogue, as well as representations of violence, is meant to be entertaining because violent movies are part of the entertainment industry and made widely available to the consumer' (107), and that those regarded by experiencers as 'the most realistic are the least entertaining' (75). As a result of all these observations and extrapolations, Hill develops the term "portfolios of interpretation" to refer to the various and fluid 'methods of response' (108) that each individual possesses to make sense of any and every film that s/he sees. As Hill puts it, "portfolios of interpretation" is a metaphor which 'best describes the accumulation of responses that are part of the viewing process' (107).

Hill's claim to present 'un-theorized' data'

By far the most problematic aspect of Hill's study is her concluding claim that she has presented in her project 'un-theorized' data' as 'raw material for future research' (103). Just from the points I have raised here it should be quite clear that there is plenty theorizing at work in Hill's study, and that while the actual participant profiles and quotations could be said to provide 'raw material' of sorts, little if any other aspect of the project could. Certainly one of the key lessons to be learned from a discussion of Hill's study is the extent to which contemporary cultural theorists' and ethnographers' debates about the impossibility of carrying out studies – let alone writing them up – *without* interpreting and theorizing the 'data' must be taken on board and considered seriously at all stages (methodological and theoretical) of research involving film experiencers.

One particularly clear way in which Hill theorizes her data comes toward the end of her book, where she moves from talking about the fluidity and 'multiform' nature of viewers' "portfolios of interpretation" to present a singular 'model of viewing process' (108-109). Even more surprisingly, Hill then presents two more detailed models, defining one as the 'Model of male viewing process' and the other as the 'Model of female viewing process' (110-111). This certainly involves theorizing data; in addition, of course, it reveals a decidedly problematic bias in Hill's work – one that reveals the extent to which Hill uses individual responses not as individual but as means 'to best represent group comments as a whole' (17) where Hill imposes the "groups" of "male" and "female" on the comments she elicits from individual participants. In addition, the fact that Hill states a key aim from the start as being to 'examine whether there is any noticeable difference between the way men and women view violence' (13) is radically problematized because she fails to identify participants 'as male or female unless the

data analysis is directly concerned with gender issues' (17). The key problem here is that her keeping back such information makes it impossible for her reader to reliably weigh up whether Hill's conclusions about the differences between "male" and "female" responses to "viewing violence" are as clear-cut and definable as her final models of gendered 'viewing process' suggest. This undermines her conclusions to my mind, and certainly highlights the problems associated with keeping your reader in the dark about the bases on which extrapolations and conclusions are drawn from data.

I should reiterate out that my aim in elucidating these problems is not to criticize Hill's work; it is rather to raise issues that an ethnographic approach might help sort out, and to alert my reader to potential pitfalls in the presentation of my own case study in Part III. Indeed, this is the purpose of much of Chapters 1 and 2 – to give a sense of what the problems are with audience, reception and other discourses about film experiencers, with the aim of trying to find ways to avoid or at least lessen the impact of such problems in my own and future work. It is with this aim in mind that I turn now to a few comments on Barker and Brooks's theory and methodology.

While I outline a number of problems with Hill's study, I recognize her desire to quote informants' words as entirely positive. In contrast, while Barker and Brooks choose to interview film experiencers, they also choose not to quote directly what they have to say for the most part. I present and discuss their reasons for this below.

Barker, Brooks & quoting informants

Barker and Brooks's study is one to which I refer regularly in this project, and their theories about and critiques of experiencer-media relations have significant parallels with my own thoughts and work. Obviously, I see a great deal of positive value in their study of people who watch (or refuse to watch) *Judge Dredd*. That said, I think there are a number of problems with the ways in which they present and extrapolate from their interview data, and since the main purpose of this section is to thrash out such problems in the interests of treating my own case study data as effectively as possible, I now highlight those problems for consideration.

While the grounds they cite rest on considered theoretical points, I am not convinced that Barker and Brooks's decision to avoid citing individual sources (and instead reproduce just one group interview transcript *in toto*) is a satisfactory one. It might avoid the pitfalls they identify, but it also results in their reader having little or no sense

of the actual words – and whose actual words - they are working with to draw conclusions about the “SPACE”s and “DRIVE”s on which so many of their claims about film experiencers are based. For me, then, the opacity of Barker and Brooks’s *actual* procedures with informants’ words is a significant problem with their study, and one that detracts from its overall force and effectiveness. In contrast, I prefer to run the risk of being accused of orchestrating the sources I cite to my own ends, but to nevertheless cite individual sources. My aim is to give a strong sense of the material with which I am working when I make claims or draw conclusions about what was said or written to me, so that any reader can test my hypotheses by looking at the words around which my conclusions are drawn rather than just being let into my hypothesizing process at the later stages. In other words, I hope that my reader can make her or his own decisions about the extent to and ways in which I have used segments of interviews, and additionally that such decisions can add to rather than detract from what understanding of film experiencers s/he gleans from reading the case study. I might add that while I do quote interviews in “segments,” I *do* try to quote lengthy segments regularly, and also to quote a number and range of individual informants at every stage to ensure some degree of genuine polyphony. Most important, though – and at odds with the decisions of Hill as well as Barker and Brooks – I remain committed to the belief that while often film theorists and critics, along with ethnographers *per se*, are interested in exploring ‘all the ways in which people are responding as members of their society’ rather than individuals (Barker and Brooks 1998a: 128), it is individuals who give up their time and their words to participate in research such as mine, and ‘informants are specific individuals with real proper names – names to be cited’ (Clifford 1983: 139). It is for such reasons that I cite the informants in the case study by name (where s/he permits it), and thus very much as individuals rather than as anonymous group members.

FILM THEORY, FILM CRITICS & MARTIAL ARTS ACTION CINEMA

In Chapter 1 I indicate ways in which a number a film theorists and critics tend to characterize experiences as well as experiencers of martial arts action films (as well as of other genres). I also suggest the extent to which such characterizations are based on largely unexplored and unfounded assumptions that render them caricatures rather than even characterizations, and the extent to which critics and theorists assume no consultation of film experiencers is necessary before making assertions or hypotheses about the pleasures and attractions of films, and/or about the identities

and interpretations of those who watch them. Certainly the pictures painted of those who watch martial arts action films is neither particularly positive nor especially wide-ranging; in contrast, my research indicates by illustration that such pictures are at best inaccurate and inadequate. In Chapter 5 I present what actual film experiencers have to write and say about martial arts action cinema. Here, though, I present a brief illustration of what film theorists and film critics write about those same films.

MARTIAL ARTS ACTION CINEMA & FILM THEORY

While film theory has a great deal to say about “the spectator” in general, it has virtually nothing to say about either the watcher of martial arts action films or about the films themselves. I have found virtually no academic writing about US martial arts action films, although there are several articles about director John Woo’s films and a fascinating piece by Clarke and Hensen about Van Damme and gay publicity. There is now a considerable body of work in film theory about other types of action film – especially US contemporary blockbusters and Hong Kong action cinema (including books by Stephen Teo, Bey Logan, and a new book by David Bordwell). However, only Yvonne Tasker’s book, *Spectacular Bodies*, also deals with some examples of action films from the US martial arts cinema. Other work on US action film tends to focus on stars such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone and Bruce Willis to the exclusion of martial arts performers. Similarly, many of the Hong Kong action films written about are those starring actors such as Chow Yun Fat, and include far more gunplay than martial arts. Problematically, Van Damme, Seagal *et al* are often mentioned in the same theoretical breath as these stars,¹⁶ and the assumption that all “action” stars are alike in key ways is thus both revealed and perpetuated (as is the assumption that all Hong Kong action films are martial arts-centred).

The reality, I would argue, is that performers in martial arts action cinema are different in key ways from stars in more mainstream action films (whether from Hollywood or Hong Kong) – and, similarly, that martial arts action films have important differences from other action films. An obvious difference is that while stars such as Schwarzenegger, Stallone and Willis rely heavily on their *bodies* for their appeal, the type of reliance – indeed, the type of body – is often quite different from that experienced by martial arts stars such as Van Damme, Seagal and Speakman. After all, the former set of stars, in essence, just need to *look* good; in contrast, the latter set

¹⁶ This is no doubt at least in part because Van Damme is regularly regarded as an aspiring Schwarzenegger - while aspects of his marketing mirror Stallone’s - and because Seagal came to prominence in a film (*Under Siege*) that deliberately and overtly rips off *Die Hard* (starring Willis).

need to be able not only to rely on their bodies to look good, but also to perform martial arts moves effectively and attractively. In a parallel way, martial arts action films depend on a set of displays different from action films to attract film experiencers. The “stars” of martial arts and other action films also differ in status. While the star status of Schwarzenegger, Stallone and Willis is immense, for instance, and they can work in different genres, martial arts film stars have neither the same star status nor the accompanying ability to cross genres; they are very much genre-bound stars. These are not the only differences between martial arts and other action films and their stars, of course (and are also somewhat simplified). But they do suggest reasons for which work on the action cinema is inadequate or even inappropriate to apply to martial arts action cinema.

One of the reasons I bring up the limitations of theory about “action” cinema to a discussion of martial arts cinema is to highlight more general assumptions made about the “sameness” of action cinema (whether martial arts or not), and the problems inherent in such assumptions. One of the main – indeed one of the *few* – contexts in which film theorists (and critics, to some extent) have discussed action cinema is as representative and supportive of right-wing ideals and values. Such analyses often refers to the action films of the “Reagan era” to illustrate its arguments, problematically associating martial arts action cinema with more mainstream action films such as *Rocky*. Also, such analyses often ignore that the “bad guys” in martial arts films are often identified as conservative. (The “bad guys” in *TimeCop*, for instance, are lead by a right-wing politician and are identified explicitly with anti-abortion, anti-immigration and pro-death penalty groups.) Some work *has* been done, of course, to suggest that such an approach to action cinema is at best limited in scope, and at worst willfully misunderstands and misinterprets texts that have genuinely multiple readings, including “oppositional” ones (cf. Tasker); overall, though, martial arts action cinema remains under-theorized despite the sense that work has been done on it as part of “action cinema” more generally.

Whether explicitly or not, much of this debate about whether action cinema “is” reactionary or not is very much about whose interpretations of the texts are valid, and so, by extension, assuming which interpretations actually take place (whether consciously or at an unconscious level) when film experiencers watch the films in question. Put simply, what is being debated is effectively whether film experiencers who enjoy watching action films are reactionary or not. As such, I hold that questions of which interpretations are actualized *must* be answered – or at least acknowledged

as centrally important – even by film theorists ostensibly interested only or primarily in the “workings of the text.” More specifically, the question of what actually happens when martial arts and other action films are “received” is *not* irrelevant to theory despite the protestations of Williams, Mayne, Doane *et al* that it is. This is especially true when hypothetical interpretations are so frequently made on homogenizing and untested assumptions about actual film experiencers (where those assumptions about *real people* are elided by the insistence that spectatorship theory works only with an ideal “spectator”). In this context, one of my aims in Part III is to show that assumptions about film experiencers who watch and enjoy martial arts action films are inaccurate, misleading and sometimes demeaning; another, closely related aim is to show that theorists’ assumptions about what the attractions of these films are are often similarly inaccurate. Because of this, I wish to emphasize that the problem lies not only – or even primarily - with inadequate assumptions about film experiencers’ politics, identities and so forth, but on misunderstanding what martial arts action film watchers enjoy about the films, and what martial arts action films offer film experiencers.

MARTIAL ARTS ACTION CINEMA & FILM CRITICISM

As with film theorists, film critics expend little energy on martial arts action cinema, although numerous reviews of the films are published precisely because its films – as with all action films – are so popular. Indeed, despite the fact that ‘[f]or close to quarter-century action/spectacle has been the most popular ... mode of film-making in Hollywood,’ it has also been ‘the most critically derided’ (Arroyo 1), and the sub-genre of martial arts action films is no exception to this. Also, while there are many short, or “capsule,” reviews of martial arts films, there is little engagement with them in more developed critical writing. While I do not claim to present illustrations from *all* available sources here, I do aim to use a sufficient number of examples to provide a “representative” sample of such writing. As such this section might be termed an “overview” of critical writing on martial arts action cinema. (This is despite my above-mentioned concerns about “overviews,” since I feel that whilst “overviews” of theoretical work are often guilty of over-simplifying or simply misrepresenting the ideas they purport to elucidate, in the context of illustrating such a delimited and simple body of work I run far less risk of falling foul of such errors.)

Positive reviews of martial arts action films

It would be inaccurate to suggest that all critical writing about martial arts action cinema is derisive and derogatory; a number of critics and publications frequently

provide positive reviews and other commentary on the genre. Magazines devoted to the action genre – such as *Impact* - more often than not publish favourable reviews of martial arts films, as do some more general film magazines – from *Heat* to *Sight & Sound*. Favourable reviews and articles focus on what martial arts action cinema has to offer watchers rather than on what they are widely held to lack.

More mainstream magazines and newspapers also provide some more positive reviews of and features about martial arts action cinema, often focusing on the ‘visual poetry’ offered by directors such as John Woo (Kenny 1); on plots perceived as exceptionally good for the genre; or on ‘a sense of ironic humor’ (Schwarzbaum 1) that many critics regard as essential elements of “the best” action films. However, even when critics are more positive about particular martial arts action films, it is often only in the context of identifying them as unusual precisely because they *are* martial arts films, and therefore from a genre of which little is expected. Additionally, films picked out as “better than average” by critics are often those made in Hong Kong, starring Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan, or directed by an *auter* such as John Woo.

Enter the Dragon – probably the best-known Bruce Lee vehicle - is often favourably reviewed. *Entertainment Weekly* reviewer Suna Chang encapsulates the mood of reviewers when he writes that ‘*Dragon* is still one of the finest kung-fu movies ever made, thanks to Lee’s agile delivery of lines and, even in this digitally restored version, punches too fast for the eye to see.’ Similarly, Jackie Chan’s films are often reviewed positively. Even Leonard Maltin praises *Police Story* for being ‘crammed with incredible stuntwork,’ and allows that although in *Police Story III: Supercop* the ‘[p]lot slows down at times... climactic action sequences make up for it.’ Much of the appeal of Chan (as opposed to US martial arts stars) to critics seems to stem from the fact that his films are often action *comedies*, while US martial arts films tend to be more serious. This is illustrated when Roger Ebert writes of *Jackie Chan’s First Strike* (certificate PG-13):

there is a sporting innocence in the action: Chan never uses a gun [sic], there is no gore and not much blood, and he’d rather knock someone out than kill him (1996).

Here, it is clear that Ebert approves of the way in which martial arts are displayed in Chan’s films (at least this one), even if he does describe Chan as ‘an acquired taste.’ (What he does not acknowledge, though, is that the protagonists of a large percentage of more “serious” martial arts action films also tend to knock out people rather than kill them.)

The significance of Woo's status as an *auter* is evident from a number of reviews of and feature articles about his films, although it is perhaps most explicitly indicated by this excerpt from a review of *Hard Target*:

Woo, a thrillingly kinesthetic pop stylist, is heir to a generation of balletic action poets. In his work, one catches flagrant visual echoes of Sam Peckinpah (*The Wild Bunch*) and Walter Hill (*The Warriors*), of Bruce Lee flicks and samurai flicks, of De Palma and Scorsese and Friedkin, of Sergio Leone's spaghetti Westerns, and of the two most brilliant action spectacles of our time: George Miller's smashingly nihilistic *Mad Max* and *The Road Warrior* (Gleiberman: "Van Damme good")..

This commentary not only emphasizes the status of Woo as an *auter* rather than exhibiting any admiration for martial arts action cinema, but fails to even acknowledge directors who are not part of the Western canon. Gleiberman mentions a whole host of US and other white Western directors by name, but makes only a passing and somewhat unconvincing reference to the 'Bruce Lee ... and samurai flicks' that are, arguably, far more of an influence on Woo and other Chinese/Hong Kong *auters* whose work receives some critical acclaim amongst Western critics. This shows how Woo's films are often – as here – identified and praised as *auter* pieces, rather than being recognized as part of the martial arts action genre; as such, their status as "good" martial arts films is elided – a move which fuels and tacitly justifies critical and theoretical perceptions of the genre as consisting largely of films redeemed not even by stylistic achievement.

Damning with faint praise

A further look at Gleiberman's review of *Hard Target*, along with other critical commentary on the film, reveals the extent to which critics tend to praise only certain aspects of even those martial arts films they purport to like, retaining an overall attitude toward the genre that is far from favourable. In the same review that celebrates Woo's 'borrow[ing] from the best' to create 'something sleek, bloody, and exciting: an action film that rediscovers the lyricism of violence,' Gleiberman starts out emphasizing that he usually dislikes martial arts films, telling his reader that '[o]ne of the few things I don't like about being a movie critic is having to sit through so many fifth-rate action films,' but reassuring us that he is no cultural snob by explaining:

It's not that I'm above enjoying a bit of the old ultraviolence. It's that the relentless "explosiveness" and grinding pulp sadism of your average Steven Seagal potboiler is enough to leave me dazed, exhausted, numb. At their worst, these movies are a degradation of what action can be ("Van Damme good").

As if this does not make it clear enough what Gleiberman's general view of martial arts action cinema is, he later writes that *Hard Target* is 'a Van Damme picture at heart' because '[t]he plot is really just there to take up space between action scenes' (ibid.). Here, while he implies that this in itself is a *bad* thing – shared by films such as the Seagal 'potboilers' to which he refers earlier – he adds that this, 'though... fits the John Woo aesthetic just fine,' since Woo 'has never been a particularly deft storyteller.'

This level of hypocrisy might be stunning, but is far from unusual in a film criticism willing to praise an *auter* for things that it regularly slates actors and lesser-known directors for doing. To pursue this example, the insistence that *Hard Target* is a remarkably good film *despite* its lead actor and lack of plot is evident in other critical writing about the film. Glenn Kenny, for instance, describes *Hard Target* as 'the best action picture of 1993, and far and away the best JCVD vehicle ever,' emphasizing throughout that Woo succeeds in moving his viewers '*despite* his lug of a male lead and the restrictions placed on him by the higher-ups.' Epitomizing critical attitudes to the film, James Berardinelli calls it 'an example of style over substance' thanks to the director, and not to the lead actor's 'ho-hum delivery.'

Martial arts film stars are often simultaneously praised and condemned by critics who praise their 'fighting style,' but deride their 'acting' abilities, the script, and/or the plot of the film in which they are performing. So, for instance, Ty Burr writes that:

While *Lionheart* won't win Oscars for script or acting (i.e., it's dumb), Van Damme's whiplash fighting style is certainly something to see. He's the Astaire of kickboxing flicks;

Tom Charity expresses relief that Chuck Norris's dialogue is minimal in *Delta Force 2*, commenting that '[i]f he did not perform most of his own stunts [he] would hardly appear in the film' (46); and Nigel Floyd writes of the 'inevitable tension' that exists in *Out for Justice* 'between Seagal's desire to create a character-driven action picture and the need to showcase his martial arts skills' as if the two things are mutually exclusive by definition. Even in generally favourable reviews, this attitude is often prevalent – as for instance when *Video Review* says of Van Damme in *Bloodsport*: 'he can't act a lick, but no matter, for *Bloodsport* is primarily just a collection of fight sequences showing off Van Damme's considerable skill as a martial artist' (60), or when Gleiberman writes:

... the fun of the movie isn't in the split-screen gimmickry or, heaven knows, in the sprawling shambles of a plot..... What makes *Double Impact*, for all

its dull-witted theatrics, an energizing experience is the picture's astonishing level of ballistic mayhem ("Brothers in arms").

Also, when one critic praises Speakman's action sequences as being 'among the genre's most kinetically convincing,' he only does so in the context of pointing out his and Van Damme's flaws – writing that '[a]s an actor, Speakman is less one-dimensional than Van Damme, though less dynamic than Seagal' although allowing that '[a]s a fighter, however, he can hold his own with either' (Hulce 1991). In a similarly damning way, Maltin writes that *Under Siege* is 'Seagal's best film to date, though his acting inadequacies point up just how much punchier film [sic] would be with a better lead.'

Another critic writes that 'some of the slightly self-conscious 'character development' scenes ... do offer more than a respite from the explosive action' in Seagal's *Out for Justice* (Floyd); again, this is faint praise indeed, especially as the implication is that usually one would not expect this of a martial arts film. Repeatedly, though, critical writing expresses surprise at any effective, positive aspect of the martial arts action cinema. For instance, while *Universal Soldier* is praised by Mark Kermode as an 'efficient and inventive sci-fi fantasy,' he adds that it 'has hardly an original idea to its name' (1992: 60), while *Time* concludes that while 'Emmerich's film may be nothing more than lowbrow, high-cal entertainment,' in an action genre now dominated by 'dubious aspirations (*Alien 3*, *Batman Returns*), it's good to get back to the bloody basics with a little style and self-satirizing wit' (20 July 1992). Also, Glaessner writes of *Death Warrant* that '[d]irector Deran Sarafian and his cinematographer intermittently capture the oppressiveness of prison life with a conviction unusual in such a routine piece;' Anne Billson writes that *Double Impact* 'lacks the cynicism of many megabudget Hollywood action movies and ... makes a genuine effort not to short-change it's audience;' Maltin writes that *Hard to Kill* is '[f]ull of the usual violence and chases for this genre, but Seagal is up to the game and fun to watch;' while Michael Stewart writes of *Universal Soldier: The Return*:

Viewing tip: Once you realize that what you're watching is a glorified zombie movie, the senseless violence, gratuitous nudity, and the presence of WCW wrestler Goldberg starts to make a crazy kind of sense.

These comments and their ilk – especially those characterized by apparently genuine surprise – suggest not only that critics have ingrained notions of what to look for and evaluate in films that simply do not gel with what martial arts action cinema (amongst others) offers film experiencers, but also that they simply do not have the experience

of such films to enable them to think, let alone *write*, intelligently or effectively about them. This is an impression underscored further by critical writing about martial arts action cinema that rather than damning with faint praise, pretty much just damns it – a brief illustration and discussion of which I present below.

Damning criticism

While many critics saw *TimeCop* as a surprisingly good martial arts film, it is one of many films attacked for its 'cavalier morality' (83) in Kathi Miao's article entitled "The wrong way to make things right." Miao complains that action heroes do not agonize over their actions but instead do as they please, showing concern only for their wives, girlfriends, and so forth (84). She also complains that action stars have become 'interchangeable,' that *TimeCop* is nothing but 'an excellent showcase for Van Damme's kicking prowess' (implying that this is necessarily a bad thing!), and that he – and many other action stars – 'cannot act' (Miao 80-81). In particular, Miao criticizes *TimeCop* for casting a Belgian as a cop with the 'oddly Anglo moniker of Max Walker' (81), and argues that the film 'debase[s] humanity' and has a hero who is not 'interested in saving the lives of innocent people' (85). Miao is not a regular film critic, but her article rests on – and is arguably representative of – many opinions and assumptions expressed and held by film critics about martial arts as well as other action films.

Maltin writes that Speakman's first film, *The Perfect Weapon*, is '[i]ndistinguishable from other martial-arts/vengeance sagas, which is certainly the least of its problems,' while Gleiberman writes of it:

During the fight scenes, it sounds as if a hundred watermelons were being clobbered at once. Other than that, it's business as usual, with the all-American Speakman proving the most generic vigilante this genre has spawned yet (29 March 1991).

In the same vein, Novak describes *Nowhere to Run* as a 'grotesquely violent action film' whose writers 'are consistently uninventive and gratuitously obscene' (1993); Letts asserts that its plots elements are 'simply vehicles for body placement' and – entirely dismissing a plot that focuses on one family's resistance of a land-owner's violent attempts at take-over – adds that 'nothing else matters' but body parts in 'this kind of film' (1993). *Billboard* dares its readers to 'watch [*Death Warrant*] and try to find something original,' and asks, '[w]ho wants to live in a world where all it takes to be a movie star is the ability to kick people in the face?' (Dare 1991); *Double Impact* is described as a film that while '[o]stensibly a thriller... is really an orgy of sex and violence which has been scrubbed up and sanitized for family viewing' (Letts, Feb.

1992); while *Under Siege* is dismissed as 'run-of-the-mill macho mayhem' because it lacks the 'knowing humour' of *Die Hard* (Davis, 1992: 54). *Universal Soldier*, meanwhile, is accused of devoting more time 'to cramming close-ups of people being shot in the head than in coherent storytelling' (*People* 20 July 1992); while Maltin describes *Bloodsport* as a '[v]iolent, low-budget action film that has its moments;' *Kickboxer* as a '[d]umb, dull martial-arts time-killer;' and *The Street Fighter* as a 'cult film notable for the level of its bone-crunching, blood-spurting violence.'

Martial arts actors are also trashed – Van Damme and Dolph Lundgren are both criticized for their 'only ... passing acquaintance with English pronunciation' (Maslin), while another critic snidely asserts that *Universal Soldier* (along with Schwarzenegger's films) proves that 'semi-robotic roles work well for semi-actors' (Wheeler 1992). In a similar vein, Wheeler writes that in *Nowhere to Run* Van Damme 'again makes up in physique what he lacks on dialog' (1993); Seagal is described as a 'lumbering leading man' manipulated by *Under Siege* director Andrew Davis 'so deftly that the actor didn't notice he was being given a personality transfusion' (Schwarzbaum 4 March 1994); and Michael Sauter writes of four new martial arts film actors that:

Most of them are real-life kickboxing stars (with championship accreditations dotting their video boxes like so many Oscars), and that keeps up the level of martial artistry. The art of acting, however, tends to take its lumps (6 Aug. 1993);

Such critical writing is clearly far from favourable, and as such provides an indication of what key criticisms are made of martial arts action cinema by film critics. First, critics complain that the films are formulaic, predictable and lacking in the areas of both plot and dialogue; second, that they are "violent." In these examples as well as in Miao's article, martial arts action films are derided as being "nothing but" showcases for martial arts skill; the critics' emphasis is firmly on narrative (problems) and morality; and concerns are regularly raised about the 'senseless violence' of the films.

Complaints about the emphasis of martial arts films on bodily display rather than plot and dialogue reflect assumptions about what 'acting' is (or should be) as well as about the status of spectacle versus narrative. I have always found it odd that while actors such as John Wayne are regularly lauded for their taciturn, physical acting (cf. Wills), martial arts stars are dismissed as being unable to act. The insistence on narrative (and moral) issues is equally problematic, since it again assumes that films should be judged on plot, dialogue and so forth to the exclusion – or at least diminishment – of

other elements. (Also, I am not anyway convinced that martial arts action films *do* have poorer narratives than most other films. Again, as I suggest above, the plots of many martial arts action films can bear a considerable amount of analysis and interpretation – the issue is whether anyone actually takes of their blinkers long enough to realize there is in fact something worth analyzing and interpreting.)

Critics and watchers of martial arts action films

As well as attacking martial arts action films and stars, film critics are not very positive when referring to their watchers. I have already indicated the problematic ways in which critics represent film viewers more generally – citing Barker and Brooks as well as other theorists who condemn critics' tendencies to make assertions and claims about "audiences," their identities, pleasures and interpretations based on unfounded assumptions rather than on legitimate grounds. Here, I simply give a brief indication of the ways in which martial arts action film watchers are caricatured by film critics, before moving to consider who it is who actually watches the films in question.

On the whole, critics spend less time commenting directly on film experiencers than they do on the films they are paid to review or otherwise write about. However, aspersions are cast regularly on martial arts action film watchers by the very fact that critics are so derisive about the films when they review them: It could hardly be argued, for instance, that a critic who consistently trashes martial arts action films for a lack of plot, poor dialogue and acting, and 'senseless violence' would nevertheless allow that regular watchers of those same films should not also be derided. In essence, being told that the films you enjoy and watch are 'dumb' (Sauter) and full of 'senseless violence.'

However, film critics *do* sometimes caricature martial arts action film watchers more directly – for instance when Maltin describes *Police Story* as '[a] real popcorn movie that's perfect for fans of the genre' and *Lionheart* as 'only for those who like films in which fights are staged ad nauseam;' when *People* describes *Universal Soldier* as 'the ideal movie for those who found *Terminator 2* insufficiently violent or too intellectually challenging' (*People* July 1992); or when Roger Ebert writes that:

Movies like this [*Cyborg*] seem to draw enthusiastic audiences, largely consisting of intense-looking adolescent males, who study the martial arts moves carefully, and dissolute-looking older males, who hoot and cheer as if each death is the visual equivalent of a punch line. Whether they prefer one martial artist to another, I cannot say (1989).

Indeed, such caricatures of an group of film experiencers who watch a martial arts action film are far from uncommon – even though, as this project hopes to illustrate, such caricatures are based on critics’ and theorists’ unfounded ideas about film experiencers, rather than on a full or clear understanding of either which film experiencers do watch and enjoy martial arts action films, *or* what they experience and enjoy about them.

JUST WHO *IS* WATCHING MARTIAL ARTS ACTION CINEMA?

One thing that my research has brought home to me is that many film theorists and critics make comments about martial arts action cinema that sound considerably more like those made by film experiencers I interviewed who have seen only few or no martial arts action films, and only rarely write anything that suggests they have actually seen many films from the genre¹⁷. This might suggest that many of the critics and theorists who write about martial arts films have not seen many from the genre, have not seen *any* from the genre, or – as I suggest above –do not understand what it is that attracts people to them, but instead insist that “violence” and “narrative” are the key categories to make sense of such films.

Overall, my research suggests that film theorists as well as film critics would do well to become more familiar with martial arts action cinema before interpreting or otherwise passing judgement on it. In this context they would also do well to understand that “the audience” of the genre is far from homogeneous, and cannot be moulded to fit *their* interpretations of the films, but might instead be considered when interpreting the films. These are important points in this project, and ones to which I return in my concluding chapter.

Of course it is not only my research that indicates film critics and theorists regularly misrepresent those who watch the films they review, analyze and otherwise comment on (where the misrepresentations seem often to apply to watchers of films the critics themselves condemn or at least do not praise). Research by Clover, Hill, Stacey, Austin, Barker and Brooks and others also suggests this is the case.

As well as misrepresenting film experiencers, it seems to me that the misunderstanding of film experiencers that underlies such misrepresentation reveals

¹⁷ Some, in contrast, write as if they have *seen* a number of the films, but have not really *watched* them, since they insist on the centrality of the plot despite numerous indications that the plot is not of central importance to either the films or their most avid watchers.

other problems with and within film theory and criticism. Specifically, it suggests that film critics often evaluate films from positions that do not fully understand what it is that the films offer film experiencers, and/or do not grasp the ways in which meanings *are* fixed, but rather persist in assuming (or claiming) that meanings are fixed in other ways – ways that *they* perceive, and which often involve a different relationship to culture and cultural capital than those experienced by film experiencers who choose to watch certain types of film. It is these issues that concern me rather than critics' attitudes to particular martial arts action films *per se*; indeed, in some cases I agree with what critics say about the films – what I do not agree with is the basis on which they make their claims and the way in which they generalize about films with which they do not appear to be very familiar or competent to evaluate.

The discussions, debates and proposals in this chapter show that film criticism and theory, including reception studies, have much work to do in terms of how they conceptualize, characterize and research (or fail to research) as well as theorize film experiencers and experiences of films. While my discussion often focuses on martial arts action films, horror films and films displaying 'new brutalism,' and as such reflects the deliberate tendency of much "audience" and reception work to focus on often denigrated genres (and denigrated experiencers), I would like to make explicit that the implications of such work are not exclusively of pertinence to understanding, researching and theorizing such texts. On the contrary, it seems that the pleasures and experiences offered by all films might productively be (re)investigated in these new terms¹⁸.

At various points in this chapter, issues of how to conduct experiencer-media relations research, and how to treat experiencers' as well as one's own experiences and identity have been central. In the next chapter I turn to discussing these aspects of research and theory more fully and directly in the context of considering how ethnographic theory and practice – and especially recent debates concerning the status of researchers and informants – has been and might be of further use to film theory and criticism genuinely interested in accessing and incorporating knowledge, discussions and awareness of film experiencers and their experiences.

¹⁸ Indeed, as Steve Neale brought to my attention, much *avant-garde* film would be especially interesting to investigate in this way: incorporating film experiencer responses to such texts would undoubtedly be helpful in understanding the attractions and other aspects of a set of films that are notoriously hard to analyze.

CHAPTER 3: ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES TO FILMS & FILM EXPERIENCERS

In this Chapter I have a number of connected aims: To adumbrate what qualitative research *is* and indicate the centrality of ethnography to conceptions of it; to outline concerns influenced by postmodern theory that have given rise to quite radical shifts and challenges within the discipline of ethnography; to discuss feminist and other anti-patriarchal influenced responses to such concerns; to investigate ways in which ethnography has already been deployed in work on media experiencers as well as to suggest new ways in which it might be; and specifically to show why I believe qualitative research in general, and ethnography in particular, is both appropriate and beneficial to work with film experiencers. In discussing these issues I also draw a number of parallels between issues in qualitative research and ethnography and those facing film and other cultural studies that deal with media experiencers. In this chapter, then, I hope to cover enough theoretical as well as methodological ground to prepare the way for my case study as well as my conclusions.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH, ETHNOGRAPHY & FILM EXPERIENCER RESEARCH

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH &/AS ETHNOGRAPHY

Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln note that qualitative research 'crosscuts disciplines, fields, and subject matter' and a range of 'historical moments' (1), and identify it as always 'multimethod in focus' and having an interpretive approach to its subject matter. They also make clear that qualitative research stresses 'no single methodology over any other' and claims no one theoretical paradigm as its own (3). But they also indicate that qualitative researchers are 'committed to... the understanding of human experience' (Nelson *et al*, qtd. Denzin & Lincoln 4), and in many ways critique the positivist project and its assumptions about truth, objectivity, and the possibility as well as desirability of transcending personal bias. As such, qualitative research, unlike positivist research, emphasizes the importance of things that are not quantifiable, stresses the social nature of reality, interrogates the relationships between researchers and their research, and situates all research – all of

which serve, ultimately, to foreground and take into consideration ‘the value-laden nature of inquiry’ (Denzin & Lincoln 4).

The *interactive* nature of the process of research is also emphasized by Denzin and Lincoln, as is the use of triangulation not as ‘a tool or strategy of validation, but an alternative’ to it, emphasizing that multiple methods add ‘rigor, breadth and depth to any investigation’ (ibid. 2). Recognizing that no single theory or method can grasp everything, and that knowledge is essentially constructed, qualitative research also foregrounds the notion that ‘[t]he interpretive practice of making sense of one’s findings is both artful and political’ since there *is* ‘no single interpretive truth’ (Denzin & Lincoln 15). Noting the numerous publications that have over the last three decades sought ‘to analyze the intimate relationship between the research process and the findings it produces,’ Altheide & Johnson highlight the new reflexivity’s insistence that ‘the observer is part and parcel of the setting, context, and culture he or she is trying to understand and represent’ (486). Outlining the situation, Altheide & Johnson point out that ‘more recent writings have sensitized us to the fact that there is more to ethnography than “what happens in the field.” Another important part of it is what takes place “back in the office” when the observer or researcher is “writing it up”’ (487) – something at which I look in more detail below, where I discuss the work of “postmodern” ethnographic theorists. Key here, alongside the recognition that knowledge is perspectival *and positioned* (cf. Abu-Lughod), is qualitative research’s commitment to ‘continue to be concerned with producing texts that explicate *how* we claim to know *what* we claim to know,’ and which acknowledge that ‘[a] valid interpretation of text without context is impossible’ since it is ‘the context that provides for interpretive meaning’ (Altheide & Johnson 496).

Although qualitative research cuts across disciplinary and paradigmatic borders, ethnography holds an important position within it historically, methodologically and theoretically. And certainly ethnography is a key disciplinary site in which critiques of qualitative research theories and practices have taken place – especially “postmodern” and other, social-identity based critiques of how culture is investigated and “written up.” But for now, the main point I want to make is that when writers refer to an “ethnographic turn” in disciplines such as reception and other cultural studies, the ethnography to which they refer is not a unitary, easily identifiable and appropriated set of theories and methods, but a multivocal discipline fraught with internal dilemmas and experiencing precisely the ‘reformulation of central questions’ (Marcus 166) that so many other disciplines are facing at this time. So before addressing more directly the

ways in which ethnographic theories and methods might be used in film experienter work, I consider the changes ethnography itself is experiencing as a result of postmodern theory's influence on it in recent years, and in the context of other methodological and theoretical interventions made by feminist and other anti-patriarchal writers. In this chapter I address these issues head on, and also investigate parallels between issues around ethnography's treatment of human subjects and those around film theory and criticism's treatment of film experiencers.

POSTMODERNIST CRITIQUES IN ETHNOGRAPHY

Theorists such as James Clifford, George Marcus and Renato Rosaldo identify their approaches to ethnography's dilemmas as heavily influenced by postmodern theory and associated concerns to undermine the positivist-objectivist paradigm within which traditional ethnographers still work. Indeed, postmodernism's desire to undermine the notion of objectivity and the metanarratives or metadiscourses that rest on such a concept is a clear influence on their concern that ethnography's classic idiom 'places the observer at a great distance from the observed' (Rosaldo 53). This revolves around classic ethnography's assumption in classic ethnography that it is possible as well as desirable to be objective (independent of practical concerns about whether or not individual ethnographies are actually objective). Mainly by example, Rosaldo shows that the notion of distance helping necessarily to confer an "objective" point of view is at least highly problematic and at worst entirely misguided (50ff). Overall, he argues that there is *too much* detachment in ethnography, and that this renders the discipline's understanding of who and what it studies inaccurate in many cases (53). However, in true postmodern style, Rosaldo concludes that the 'normalizing accounts' of classic ethnography that he and theorists such as Clifford and Marcus critique should not be banished, but rather 're-read' and re-located as one of many valid ways through which aspects of social reality can be 'reveal[ed] and conceal[ed]' (ibid. 61).

In his seminal 1983 article, "On ethnographic authority," Clifford writes that:

In recent years works like Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Paulin Hountondji's *Sur la "philosophie africaine"* have cast radical doubt on the procedures by which alien human groups can be represented, without proposing systematic, sharply new methods or epistemologies. These studies suggest that while ethnographic writing cannot entirely escape the reductionist use of dichotomies and essences, it can at least struggle self-consciously to avoid portraying abstract, a-historical "others" (119).

The aims cited here for ethnography – to ‘struggle self-consciously to avoid portraying abstract, a-historical “others”’ – might equally be claimed for the film theory and criticism imagined by reception and other film experienter researchers such as Austin, Barker, Brooks and Hill. The aims of many engaged in “audience” research, after all, revolve around precisely the notion that ways in which we represent media experiencers must be re-examined in an attempt to ‘avoid portraying abstract, a-historical “others.”’

ABOUT ETHNOGRAPHIC AUTHORITY

The process of fieldwork and the figure of the fieldworker became increasingly prominent and validated following the emergence in the 1920s of ethnographers such as Malinowski, Mead, Boas and Radcliffe-Brown. While such a move is still seen as marking the beginnings of modern ethnography, Clifford and other contemporary critics identify problems surrounding this emergence that still haunt ethnography today.

Much of Clifford’s article concerns itself with ways in which ethnography has developed as a discipline since the 1880s, focusing on dominant tendencies in how research is carried out and written up. Taking some of his comments as starting points, I now highlight and consider particular ways in which ethnography’s development might provide useful lessons for film theorists and critics involved in representing film experiencers.

Theoretical abstractions & other problems

From the 1920s there emerged in ethnography ‘certain powerful theoretical abstractions [that] promised to help ethnographers “get to the heart” of a culture more rapidly than someone undertaking, for example, a thorough inventory of customs and beliefs’ (Clifford 1983: 125). Here, parallels might readily be drawn between ethnography employing theoretical abstractions about cultures, film theory’s tendency to utilize psychological theories – from psychoanalysis to cognitivism – to “get to the heart” of people who watch films, and film criticism’s invoking “folk theories” of the media when evaluating and characterizing films and their experiencers. Just as reception theorists and others are voicing considerable concern about the use and validity of such generalizing approaches and models – theoretically powerful as they are – so have ethnographers challenged cultural work based on abstraction rather than thorough studies of actual people.

Also from the 1920s it became increasingly acceptable for ethnographers in the field to merely “use” rather than “master” native languages so long as s/he could use them sufficiently well ‘to ask questions, maintain rapport, and generally get along in the culture’ (Clifford 1983: 124; cf. Mead). In a related shift, ethnographers tended to *focus* their research more from the 1920s. As Clifford puts it:

since culture, seen as a complex whole, was always too much to master in a short research span, the new ethnographer tended to focus thematically on particular institutions. The aim was not to contribute to a complete inventory or description of custom, but rather to get at the whole through one or more of its parts’ (1983: 125).

Additionally, research at this time tended to be short-term, because ‘[t]o introduce long-term historical enquiry would have impossibly complicated the task of the new-style fieldwork’ (Clifford 1983: 125). Interesting similarities are apparent between these aspects of change in ethnography and more recent issues surrounding the study of film and other media experiencers.

First one might note ways in which film theorists and critics are condemned by film experienter researchers for not understanding the language(s) used by actual film experiencers, thereby missing (or misinterpreting) what pleasures and meanings they derive from films and what aspects of filmic experience are important to them in what ways. Barker and Brooks feel this lack of understanding of the vernacular is really problematic, and is especially evident in the degree to which the vocabulary used by film theorists and many critics is not at all commensurate with vocabulary used by people who actually watch and/or enjoy the films in question. Such disparity is evidenced by the problematic use of the term “violent,” for instance. While film theorists and critics regard this as a somewhat straightforward term, many people (and here I refer to many of the participants in my own research) are not comfortable with the way it is used. Equally, Barker and Brooks find that phrases such as “being done to” are significant aspects of film experiencers’ vocabularies, but are rarely considered as significant (if indeed they are recognized at all) by film theorists and critics (146).

The degree to which theorists focus their research has also been an important aspect of recent debates about media experienter work. Radway, for instance, has argued that rather than specific media texts and/or groups of experiencers, ‘the everyday’ should be the subject of study. And as well as considering the limitations of studies in terms of focus, the amount of time spent in the field – and the “depth” of the fieldwork – has been an issue of some significance across areas of media experienter work, as I discuss further below.

The visualist bias

The 1920s are also identified as the historical moment during which the visualist bias became prominent in ethnography. Clifford identifies the time as that during which 'ethnography was marked by an increased emphasis on the power of observation,' and that 'a distinct primacy was accorded to the visual' when 'the participant-*observer* emerged as the research norm' (1983: 125). In his introduction to *Writing Culture* three years later, Clifford cites Ong's study of 'ways in which the senses are hierarchically ordered in different cultures and epochs' (11) when discussing the same bias, pointing out the importance of work by theorists such as Ong, and also of Fabian, who 'explores the consequences of positioning cultural facts as things observed, rather than, for example, heard, invented in dialogue, or transcribed' (Clifford 1986: 12). Dwight Conquergood also refers to the West's, and thus ethnography's tendency to privilege the visual, arguing that a postmodern, or critical sensibility should lead to a 'rethinking of ethnography as primarily about speaking and listening, instead of observing,' linking this to how 'the visualist bias of positivism' *has* been challenged 'with talk of voices' and such like in recent decades (Conquergood 183).

Parallels are evident here between classical ethnography's and film theory's privileging of the visual versus newer, so-called postmodern tendencies to give weight to the oral and the aural. One particular comment sheds as much light on film theory's distanced and distancing theorization of film experiencers as it does on ethnography's detached view of its subjects: Conquergood writes that '[l]istening is an interiorizing experience... whereas observing sizes up exteriors' (183). In the case of film experiencers, one of the key problems with film theory and criticism is *precisely* their tendency to privilege observing over listening to film experiencers (as well as films themselves¹). Its tendency to observe and "size up" film experiencers rather than listen to what they have to say is evident, and compounded by the acceptance of an epistemological system that permits film theorists and critics to make "observations" about film experiencers via textual analysis of what *they* (the theorists and critics) watch – or even, as is clearly the case with many action films, make "observations" about the watchers and the film without actually watching the film. The irony here of course is that while film theory long ago recognized that '[c]losure ... is constituted by the gaze' (Conquergood 183²) in its theorization of the "male gaze" etc., that has not

¹ Film theory and criticism's tendency to privilege visual rather than audio aspects of texts is part of the same underlying bias – and is challenged in part by sound theorists in film studies.

prevented the discipline from subjecting both the films it studies, and those who watch them, to a version of that very same gaze. (It is for such reasons that I am happier to talk with my informants rather than “observe” them.) It is in this context I propose that film theory and criticism should move from a visually biased paradigm to a more discursive one – a move that is perhaps especially attractive to reception theorists and the “ethnographic turn” given the argument that ‘[a]n interest in the discursive aspects of cultural representation draws attention not to the interpretation of cultural “texts” but to their relations of production’ (Clifford 1986: 13).

WRITING ETHNOGRAPHY: ISSUES & CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

Even from the points above which focus on only a few of the issues raised by Clifford, it is clear that many issues at stake in ethnography’s history are currently at stake in areas of film theory linked – explicitly or not - to the debate about whether film theory and criticism should base its theories and evaluations on hypothetical or empirically researched film experiencers. This I hope underlines the extent to which drawing on the lessons and debates of ethnography for the benefit of film theory and criticism can be extremely productive.

Of course the type of ethnography established during the 1920s and beyond has gone through a number of changes; many of these are discussed by authors such as Geertz, Clifford and Marcus in key ethnographic texts that reference the impact and significance of such changes to the emergence of contemporary questions surrounding ethnographic theory and method. Crucially, though, during the last twenty-odd years, ‘the unreciprocal quality of ethnographic interpretation has been called to account;’ this has led to a current state of affairs where now in ethnography ‘[p]aradigms of experience and interpretation are yielding to paradigms of discourse, of dialogue and polyphony’ (Clifford 1983: 133). The shift reception and other media experienter theorists are pushing for might be described in just such paradigmatic terms. Rather than relying on film theorists’ and critics’ experiences and interpretations of texts and those who experience them, theories and criticisms involving discourse, dialogue and polyphony are taking hold, in which the voices, experiences and interpretations of actual experiencers are being sought out and included not only in analyses of film experiencers but of films themselves.

A key problem, though, is that while ‘[c]urrent ethnographic writing is seeking new ways to adequately represent the authority of informants... there are few models to

² Here, Conquergood is referring to ethnography, not film theory.

look to' (Clifford 1983: 136). In response to the problem, Clifford suggests ethnography look into its history, showing how 'older assemblages include much that is actually or all but written by informants,' citing Malinowski's and Boas's work as useful instances of such studies (1983: 136). This is echoed in my suggestion that works such as Blumer's might be looked to for the wealth of first-hand film experienter information they provide, despite the need to be aware of the problematic ways in which informants' words are presented and interpreted.

Clifford writes at some length about how many contemporary ethnographic theorists have shifted their focus to think through how they might best write up their research in the light of challenges to previous models and assumptions, as indeed do the majority of the contributors to the seminal collection of essays he edited with Marcus in 1986, *Writing Culture: The Poetics & Politics of Ethnography*. Indicating the underlying concern of the entire collection, Clifford writes in his introductory chapter that while '[p]articipant observation, the classic formula for ethnographic work, leaves little room for texts' (1), it is now the case that 'writing has emerged as central to what anthropologists do in the field and thereafter' (2). Other contributors discuss writing up ethnography in literary terms, discussing for instance ways in which ethnographic authority is constituted through style (cf. Crapanzano), how ethnography might be written as autobiography (cf. Fischer), and how writing about field experiences can at least start to disturb the 'subjective/objective balance' (Marcus 13). All contributors have a sense of ethnography's status as "fiction" – recognizing with Clifford that while this 'may raise empiricist hackles,' the word 'as commonly used in recent textual theory has lost its connotations of falsehood' and instead points to the partiality of 'truths' (Clifford 1986: 6).

In 1983, discussing the relationship between ethnography and novels, Clifford notes that '[s]ome use of indirect style is inevitable, unless the novel or ethnography be composed entirely of quotations, which is theoretically possible but seldom attempted' (1983: 137). Expanding the discussion, though, Clifford points out that

the ethnography and the novel have recourse to indirect style at different levels of abstraction. We need not ask how Flaubert knows what Emma Bovary is thinking, but the ability of the fieldworker to inhabit indigenous minds is always in doubt; indeed this is a permanent, unresolved problem of ethnographic method (1983: 137).

Clifford then outlines ways in which ethnographers have attempted to address concerns about not citing participants enough or appropriately – a discussion of which was important to developing as well as writing up my own research on martial arts

action cinema experiencers. One tactic I use in my case study is described by Clifford as an 'increasingly common way to manifest the collaborative production of ethnographic knowledge,' and that is to 'quote regularly and at length from informants' (1983: 139). At the same time, I remain aware of the limitations of such an approach – limitations already hinted at by Mayne, Williams *et al's* skepticism about citing "real" film experiencers, and by Barker and Brooks's reservations. As Clifford puts it, extensive quotation '[o]nly *begins* to break up monophonic authority' since '[q]uotations are always staged by the quoter, and tend to serve merely as examples, or confirming testimonies' – and further, even if one produces 'a more radical polyphony,' 'this too would only displace... authority' since it is still one author who orchestrates all the voices to form one text (1983: 139).

Disheartening though these realizations are, I do not believe they render the regular and extensive quotation of participants meaningless or without epistemological weight: It is true that quoters generally use quotations 'as examples, or confirming testimonies' to illustrate and ultimately support their own ideas; at the same time, honesty and reflexivity on the part of the quoter can at least try to minimize the use of quotations solely for such purposes, and quoting passages that contradict or otherwise don't fit an author's hypotheses can also help in this regard. Hill's study lacks such reflexivity and range of quotation, as I discuss above, and as such is fairly easy to criticize on the grounds of orchestrating participant voices rather than letting them speak for themselves. While Barker and Brooks's study displays considerably more reflexivity and range of quotation – not to mention a far wider range of participants in the first place – it too has its problems, as I discuss in Chapter 2.

A MORE CRITICAL APPROACH

Taking a more overtly critical approach than Rosaldo, Clifford and Marcus, Conquergood focuses explicitly on the significance of reflexivity, focusing his attack on "objectivity" by recognizing as crucially important the various specific ways in which such a concept is undesirable and impossible to achieve, rather than looking at "detachment" in a more general, abstract sense. This contributes to the way in which Conquergood more than other postmodern ethnographers *politicizes* ethnography through an application of postmodern influences; Conquergood's work is therefore of more interest to my own project.

Essentially, Conquergood's focus is on ethnography's interest in how it makes its texts (191), and how the acknowledgement that ethnography does not provide 'innocent

descriptions' has in fact 'helped politicize ethnography' in itself (Conquergood 193). In this way, Conquergood seems closer to Fiske's critical claim that '[t]he point of producing knowledge is not just to understand out social conditions but to work to improve them' (Fiske 334) than do theorists such as Rosaldo, Clifford and Marcus. But whatever their individual differences of degree, all these theorists provide a challenge to "classic" ethnography – and to the position held for instance by Donal Carbaugh (1990) to which Fiske's above-cited quotation is a direct response. Rosaldo, Conquergood, Fiske, Clifford *et al*, then, all reveal important aspects if the impact of postmodern thought on ethnography.

Evidently much of what is argued in the name of postmodernism is useful in making ethnography consider its traditional research modes, its acceptance of a positivist-objectivist paradigm, and especially its accepted modes of writing up research. However, there are problems with the use of postmodernism to raise such issues. Primarily, the relocation of classic norms as "one among many" ways to approach ethnographic study is, I think, problematic precisely because it elides the urgency to fully critique precisely that "classic" approach.

Conquergood's critique of ethnography's privileging of the text and visual rather than oral/aural, discussed above, is an important aspect of his critique of traditional ethnography. However, Conquergood refers to the increased emphasis on oral rather than visual data as being tied to a postmodern influenced 'return of the body' (180). And while this is an important point – and one made by many postmodern theorists in ethnography – it needs rigorous investigation because the "body" about which such theorists write is peculiarly abstract (by which I mean it is not described in terms of gender, race, class or other social identities). Similarly, the postmodern influenced focus on reflexivity advocated by theorists such as Conquergood and Clifford is open to critique because of the way it is described and practiced. For instance, Bette J. Kauffman notes of the emphasis of reflexivity amongst postmodern ethnographers that 'little of this self-examination deals with the political subjectivities of researchers in terms of gender and sexuality, race, and social class' (Kauffman 188). She is also concerned that the postmodern influence in ethnography fetishizes both form and the authorial persona, which in turn '[d]isplace[s] concerns about the relationship between the ethnographic texts and the others it purports to be about' (190).

Conquergood's comments about the peripheral and the centre are also interesting in relation to film theory. In agreeing with Rosaldo that 'the research agenda needs to

move from centres to “borderlands”... where many identities and interests articulate with multiple others’ (Conquergood 183; cf. Rosaldo 1989: 17 & 28), Conquergood makes a definitive postmodern turn. In the field of film theory, such a turn has been taken most decisively by reception theorists who are concerned with small groups of often marginal media experiencers (in terms of gender or sexuality and sometimes race and class) and their readings of films. Here, reception studies and ethnography influenced by postmodernism seem to take very seriously Bakhtin’s assertion that ‘the most intense life of culture takes place on the boundaries’ (1982: 2; cited Conquergood 186). While this is a valid political project, it seems that it should be undertaken only in a context of clearly recognizing the power of the “centre,” and also of being sensitive to ways in which such studies tend to give a heightened emphasis on agency as opposed to structure. This ignores, as Klinger concludes, that seemingly disparate readings of any film arguably form part of ‘a single economy of viewing produced by a concerted effort on the part of the film industry to encourage certain diverse readings in a film’ designed to attract as many experiencers (consumers) as possible to maximize profits (Klinger 131). Echoing Hebdige’s and Gramsci’s ideas about hegemony, Klinger reminds those studying film experiencers that readings are not oppositional by virtue of being peripheral, since there’s a whole ‘sphere of reactions available to the ‘everyday’ social spectator that are influenced by social institutions seeking to multiply readings of a text *within ideological parameters*’ (132, my italics).

It is not coincidental that Klinger is a feminist scholar, and that her warnings concern postmodern tendencies to over-emphasize – indeed, privilege – agency over structure. From here, then, I shift my focus to look at the influence of postmodernism on ethnography in the context of a feminist critique. In essence, I hold that feminism not only identifies the key points on which postmodernism has based its own identity and existence, but also that it is a more useful analytical and critical tool than postmodernism. Underlying this position is the (not at all simple) fact that there are so many feminists, myself included, who, to poach Margery Wolf’s unfortunately apt phrase, ‘are indignant and at the same time wryly amused to hear the critiques they have leveled for years now being translated into postmodernist terminology and taken *very seriously*’ (Wolf 6-7). And Kauffman identifies the core problem when she writes that ‘feminist efforts have not produced the desired epistemological and methodological revolutions’ because ‘they have been constituted as specific to feminist research’ (188).

CHALLENGES TO CLIFFORD *ET AL*'S CONCERNS ABOUT "WRITING CULTURE"

Paul Rabinow argues that ethnographic theorists such as Geertz and Clifford 'fail to use self-referentiality as anything more than a device for establishing authority' (244), and is highly skeptical of their focus on literary modes of "writing up," picking up Clifford's own point that in the case of so-called dialogic texts, '[t]he mode offers no guarantees' (246). As such, Rabinow seems to take considerably more seriously than other contributors to *Writing Culture* Clifford's own acknowledgement that the 'sharp separation of form from context – and our fetishizing of form' so evident throughout the rest of the collection 'was, and is, contestable' (Clifford 1983: 21). (Rabinow's concerns in some ways echo those of spectatorship theorists' concerned that simply citing and referring to actual film experiencers does not validate reception and other film experiencer theorists' claims; at the same time, though, I doubt very much that Rabinow would see the spectatorship theorists' invocation of hypothetical subjects and generalized theoretical models as a better, more useful way to proceed.)

The doubts Rabinow casts over ideas expressed by Clifford, Marcus *et al* are shared and elaborated on by many feminist and other anti-patriarchal theorists in ethnography. Theories stemming from anti-patriarchal positions – those opposed to sexism, racism, colonialism, ageism and heterosexism, for instance – are much more *grounded* than so-called postmodern theories. While criticisms of essentialism leveled at feminism and other such political positions are often valid (perhaps especially in the case of heterosexist feminisms), I am far more concerned that postmodernism is, in contrast, engaged in an erasure of the body – at least of any body that is gendered or otherwise marked socio-politically. My concern is that categories essential to social criticism, such as gender and class, do not survive shifts to postmodern theory. Such a concern is grounded in the idea that '[t]o invoke the idea of endless difference is for feminism either to self-destruct or to finally accept an ontology of abstract individualism' (Nicholson 8). Such an ontology – and resultant epistemology – might be worth embracing at some point, but as of now it would be political and theoretical madness to accept precisely because 'since men have had their Enlightenment, they can afford a sense of decentred self and a humbleness regarding the coherence and truth of their claims' (Nicholson 6), but women and many other people excluded from the Enlightenment (including, of course, a whole host of ethnographic subjects) cannot afford to entertain such a sense of they want to address and escape their actual oppression.

So, while essentialism and foundationalism should be avoided in social criticism, the point remains that to avoid these things we need not eliminate theorists that rely on the existence and application of social categories such as gender, ethnicity, age, class and sexuality. But still postmodernists such as Lyotard rule out theories which emphasize such categories – or use them at all – as too generalizing, arguing that ‘the field of the social is heterogeneous and nontotalizable’ (Fraser & Nicholson 24). This kind of move points to how postmodernism pulls the rug out from under the kind of social criticism anti-patriarchalism demands; how postmodernists are circumventing (rather than answering) the need for such criticism by denying both its pertinence and feasibility; and how – most importantly – social criticism simply is not of interest to postmodern theorists, who are *still*, in the main, straight white men who are (at least) middle class intellectuals – hardly the people best positioned to assert that there is no place for categories such as race, class and gender in social criticism. In fact, I would go so far as to argue that postmodernism is in effect little more than another ingenious way for the western intellectual elite to exert its still exnominated white masculine self as “the” definitive self, as “the” position from which to observe and write about (if also now perhaps to also listen to) “others.”³ This view gains weight precisely from the contents of arguments and articles by theorists such as Clifford – as well as from feminist critiques of them. Kauffman, for instance, identifies ways in which postmodern ethnographic texts fail to realize how much their fetishization of form and of the ethnographic author is ‘in itself a political as much as a metatextual move, once again privileging by exnominating a white, bourgeois, patriarchal standpoint’ (191).⁴ It seems to me that much of what postmodern critics have contributed to (and within) ethnography is tainted by precisely this kind of problem, and it is for such reasons that I am wary of taking up the issues Clifford *et al* focus on as the most crucial in my own project to research and write about film experiencers.

To be of real use to researching human subjects, then, postmodernism needs to learn from feminism and other such positioned theories to ‘insist on being recognized as a set of viewpoints of a time,’ place, etcetera (Nicholson 11). As Kauffman writes, while feminists may be well aware of the problems of essentialism, they are more wary of pretending that socio-political categories do not exist – especially when ‘some

³ Carbaugh certainly seems guilty of this, for instance: And he is not influenced by postmodernists *per se*, but is rather carrying out a more classic ethnography – yet he still mirrors Lyotard’s refusal to engage in ‘the sort of critical social theory which employs general categories like gender, race, and class’ on the so-called postmodern grounds that ‘the field of the social is heterogeneous and nontotalizable’ (Fraser & Nicholson 24).

⁴ See also Abu-Lughod.

standpoints have scarcely begun to know themselves as either subjectivities or political, and in that privileged lack of critical self-awareness, social and cultural hierarchies are present and extended' (Kauffman 201).

The influences of postmodernism have been both positive and negative in the work of ethnographers such as Conqergood, Rosaldo, Clifford and Rabinow; these influences also have both positive and negative implications for my project. Some of the positive aspects are that my desire to use a participative approach to inquiry is bolstered by the postmodern insistence that there is no reason to aim for a detachment or distance from subjects of inquiry, since the "objectivity" aimed for in such a move is unobtainable; related to this is the acknowledgement in ethnography informed by postmodernism that all knowing is from a perspective, so the "objectivist" view of data is unrealistic. My interest in film experiencers' agency and their articulation of it is also bolstered by postmodern theory, since in its epistemology knowledge is local, *ad hoc* and historically specific. On the negative side, a consideration of structure (and, thus, social criticism) is subsumed under that of agency in postmodernism; multiple perspectives are not linked to aged, gendered, racially or sexually marked bodies in postmodern theory, but to entirely individual bodies that defy such categories; and my desire to carry out an anti-patriarchal, politically motivated study is radically undermined by postmodernism, since the categories of structure and social identities I might use in this critical quest are rendered meaningless by it.

So while I see some positive aspects of postmodern theory, I remain convinced that some if not all those influences just as easily – and perhaps more directly – can be found in anti-patriarchalist theories and criticism. That said, for my project and the larger project of media experienter research as well as ethnographic research more generally, it is better to be dealing with disciplines stirred up by reflexivity stemming from postmodernist questionings of theoretical and methodological traditions rather than disciplines that have not addressed such concerns.

I think the thorniest issue raised by these discussions is that of how to treat individual informants in a way that balances appropriately between agency and structure. I do not want to abandon socio-political categories, but neither do I want to categorize film experiencers in such categories. I find this problem extremely difficult to navigate in my case study - where I have to face the realities of writing up research in which my crucial problem might be articulated thus: 'I too would not essentialize or reify these particularities [of gender, race, social class]. But is the only alternative pretending they

do not exist?’ (Kauffman 200). For now, though, I leave aside the particular problems of creating a framework that has room for structure and agency in appropriate measures, and move to talk more specifically about the appeal of qualitative research, and ethnography in particular, for those interested in film experienter research and theory, looking first at how cultural studies has appropriated ethnography to research media experiencers.

CULTURAL STUDIES, FILM STUDIES &/AS ETHNOGRAPHY

A large number of cultural studies theorists, especially those involved in reception and audience studies, look to ethnography for ways in which to research and theorize contemporary culture. Indeed, since much of what Denzin and Lincoln write about qualitative research sounds rather like a description of cultural studies, it is hardly surprising that cultural studies as a discipline has taken up qualitative research theories and methods with so much enthusiasm. The parallels between cultural studies and qualitative research are further underlined when Denzin and Lincoln term those who engage in qualitative research as very much *bricoleurs*.

While ethnography was initially formed with the intention of observing and understanding usually overseas cultures of “the other” (such as Malinowski’s 1922 study of the Trobriand Islanders, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*), it has in the latter part of the twentieth century evolved to look also at cultures nearer “home” – for instance in *Learning to Labor*, Paul Willis’ study of British working-class youth (1977); *Number Our Days*, Barbara Myerhoff’s study of Jewish old people in Venice, California (1978); and as part of Joseph J. Tobin, David Y. H. Wu and Dana H. Davidson’s study of *Preschool in Three Cultures* (1989)⁵. Such developments in ethnography need to be kept in mind when considering relationships and tensions between it and cultural studies. One clear ramification is that while ‘[u]nlike traditional anthropology... [cultural studies] has grown out of analyses of modern industrial societies’ (Grossberg *et al* 4), many ethnographers have previously and continue to apply their methods and theories of cultural exploration to groups in modern industrial societies. This in turn suggests that there is nothing “wrong” with cultural studies appropriating ethnographic theories and methods to study contemporary culture, including the reception of cultural

⁵ These are all studies introduced to me in Kristine Fitch’s ethnographic methods class at the University of Iowa in Fall 1999.

forms such as television and film. It would follow that if Moores is right to claim that cultural studies research such as Morley's 'sessions spent talking about television in the sitting room of eighteen south London homes' can share 'some of the same general intentions' as traditional ethnographic research such as that conducted by Malinowski during 'two years living amongst the Trobriand Islanders' (1993: 4), then surely cultural studies work on reception shares something with ethnographies conducted in Europe and the US. The fact is, though, that many anthropologists, and some people in cultural studies, remain at least skeptical about the utilization of so-called ethnography in reception work and cultural studies in general: The main contention here is that the work done in cultural studies under the banner of "ethnography" is *not* ethnography – whether or not the projects share 'some of the same general intentions' (Moores 1996: 4). Those who insist that cultural studies *can* do ethnographic work, however, have a very clear sense of the ways in which ethnography can and should be utilized in the study of reception as well as 'everyday life.'

ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES TO CULTURAL STUDIES & "THE AUDIENCE"

Following their attempt to produce effective research on audiences of *Nationwide*, both Morley and Brunsdon went on to utilize ethnographic methods to study other television audience members in the 1980s; Dorothy Hobson also did ethnographic work in her study of women viewers of soap operas in the UK. Ethnographic methods were also employed in the United States, where Janice Radway (1984) conducted her study of women romance readers and James Lull (1990) carried out extensive ethnographic research on television audiences during the 1980s. These studies reveal a growing awareness in the 1980s of the need for media theorists to study audiences and viewing contexts in a concrete rather than theoretical manner, and in the growing preference for qualitative ethnographic rather than quantitative approaches to those studies.

Ang and Moores are both committed to using ethnography in cultural studies and/as audience studies, even if they differ somewhat in the specifics of how and to what exactly ethnographic approaches might be applied. At the start of his 1993 study, *Interpreting Audiences: The Ethnography of Media Consumption*, Moores sets out his general attitude to ethnography quite clearly:

I believe that a critical ethnographic practice best equips us to map out the media's varied uses and meanings for particular social subjects in particular cultural contexts. Such a method departs and differs from other approaches, in both academic and industry-led research, which

have failed to deal adequately with the dynamics and diversity of media reception (1).

In her 1996 book, *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*, Ang sets out similar reasons for turning to ethnography in the study of audiences, writing that:

Ethnographically oriented research is arguably the most suitable to unravel the minutiae of difference and variation as they manifest themselves in concrete, everyday instances of media consumption. What ethnographic work entails is a form of 'methodological situationalism', underscoring the thoroughly situated, always context-bound ways in which people encounter, use, interpret, enjoy, think and talk about television and other media in everyday life (70-71).

Both theorists also reference and respond positively to ethnography's favoring 'interpretive particularization over explanatory generalization, historical and local concreteness rather than formal abstraction, 'thick' description of details rather than extensive but 'thin' survey' (Ang 1996: 71), and its potential for 'giving voice to everyday interpretations 'from below' while recognizing its own status as an interpretive activity' (Moore 1). These claims and observations about ethnography are in many ways typical of those made by theorists in cultural studies looking to ethnography for assistance in studying the complexities that constitute "the audience," myself included.

Equally important as well as typical of cultural studies commentaries on ethnography and its uses for audience and other cultural research are warnings such as Ang's about 'the urgency of rethinking the significance of ethnography, away from its status as realist knowledge in the direction of its quality as a form of storytelling, as narrative,' where the point is

not to see this as a regrettable shortcoming to be eradicated as much as possible, but as an inevitable state of affairs which circumscribes the implicatedness and responsibility of the researcher/writer as a producer of descriptions which play their political roles as particular ways of seeing in an ever elusive reality (1996: 75-6).

This warning forms part Ang's call for an acknowledgement of the 'inevitably *partial* (in the sense of unfinished and incomplete) nature of our theorizing and research' as an epistemological starting position from which to foreground 'the other, *political* meaning of being partial' (Ibid. 67). Her position on how and why ethnography should be utilized in and by cultural studies focuses heavily on the "postmodern" context that has emerged in recent decades, and this certainly makes sense given the changes in ethnography provoked by postmodern critiques as well as the feminist and other anti-patriarchal commentaries on them. The situation "in" ethnography – especially the

moves to make ethnography itself a *critical* cultural practice (cf. Conquergood) – is essential to understanding why and how ethnography might most productively and effectively be integrated with cultural studies. However, I strongly believe that, as many commentators (including Ang) recognize, ‘it would be naïve and dangerous to suppose that some kind of easy ‘merger’ of approaches could take place’ because of the different philosophical and methodological presumptions of each set of approaches (Barker 188). In Chapters 3 and 4 I focus on a range of questions and issues thrown up by this situation, and try to forge a path through at least some of them on the way to making sense of and setting out my case study. For now I want just to indicate the significance of such internal conflicts and changes in ethnography to the “anthropological anxieties” expressed to the “external” threat of cultural studies.

Having established a loose outline of ways in which, and reasons for which cultural studies theorists believe ethnography is actually and potentially both useful and suitable to projects that involve studying “the audience,” I want to take a look at reactions to this situation from those considerably less convinced of its validity than writers such as Morley, Moores and Ang. To do so I look at the Manchester University-hosted debate entitled ‘Cultural Studies will be the death of Anthropology’ commented on by Morley in a recent article in *Cultural Studies* (1998).

IS CULTURAL STUDIES THE DEATH OF ANTHROPOLOGY?

As I have mentioned already, central to the debates around cultural studies’ use of ethnography are questions of ‘whether what passes for ethnography in cultural studies is anything like acceptable in terms of anthropological standards of depth and intensity of fieldwork’ (Morley 1998: 482). Placing such anxieties in a wider of recent ‘attacks on the overall project of cultural studies, both in the popular press and within the academy, by scholars associated with the more established disciplines of sociology and anthropology’ (ibid. 477)⁶, Morley discusses the debate, as cited above, organized by the ‘Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory’ – a debate at which, Morley reports, a number of participants made evident they view cultural studies as ‘fundamentally parasitic on anthropology’ (482).

Willis and Nugent are cited by Morley as feeling that the work carried out in cultural studies under the banner of ethnography is *not* ethnography essentially because no

⁶ Attacks from the popular press are perhaps best exemplified by those cited and discussed in Chapter 1 of Barker & Brooks’s *Knowing Audiences*; such attacks are pertinent to my own case study, and are something I discuss in that context.

long-term fieldwork is carried out: Willis argues that ‘the media tradition of ethnography has truncated ethnography, whilst claiming its authority and power’ (in Wade, 1996: 39; cited Morley 1998: 482), while Nugent, in *Anthropology and Cultural Studies*, ‘similarly argues that the two disciplines’ usages of the term ‘ethnography’ are quite incompatible’ (Morley 1998: 483). Of course not all ethnographers feel this way; both the desire of Dwight Conquergood to “rethink” ethnography as a *critical* cultural practice (1991), and Renato Rosaldo’s redefinition of ethnography ‘after objectivism’ (1989 – especially chapter 2) provide just two of many reasons why, as Mark Hobart points out, ‘in the real world, that flagship department of anthropology, Chicago, has (already) become the Centre for Transnational Cultural Studies’ (in Wade 1996: 14; cited Morley 1998: 483). However, I see no evidence that opinions about whether or not ethnography exists in cultural studies are divided neatly along “pro” and “con” lines, although Morley’s commentary does tend to suggest that is the case: There are, as Morley acknowledges, people in cultural studies who are skeptical about the appropriation of ethnographic theories and methods. Also, “within” ethnography there is considerable debate about how and how far ethnography should enter into arenas of “cultural studies,” as exemplified in the exchange between Carbaugh and Fiske which I mention above.

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CULTURAL STUDIES?

My responses to the debates highlighted in Morley’s 1998 article are not as clear-cut as I expected them to be – especially given my strong agreement that when studying culture ‘we are better served by a multi-dimensional model which builds new insights on to the old, in a process of dialogue transformation which, if necessarily at points selective, is none the less synergetic and inclusive by inclination’ (Morley 1998: 493)⁷. My ambivalence about cultural studies’ utilization of ethnography comes not at all from the theoretical implications of a position that sees cultural studies as essentially, and positively, an alchemy; I believe absolutely that cultural studies and ethnography can learn and benefit from each other. Rather, my ambivalence stems from the ways in which ethnography is *actually* being appropriated (and I use that word pointedly) by cultural studies and/as reception studies. It is one thing, perhaps, to claim to be carrying out ethnographically *inspired* – or [e]thnographically *oriented*’ (Ang 1996: 70, my emphasis) – work, which, as I indicate above, might be said to share ‘general intentions’ with ethnography (Moore 1996: 4). However, I believe it is quite a leap

⁷ I also agree with Morley’s subsequent comment that if this point seems simplistic, we should acknowledge that ‘the pressures of a competitive academic marketplace militate against this approach’ (1998: 493).

from there to claim that cultural studies is undertaking ethnography – primarily because, as Willis and Nugent point out, the same depth, intensity and length of fieldwork is simply not present. My suggestion – having carried out both in-depth but one-off interviews with participants *and* similarly-structured interviews with participants in whose community of practice (club) I was involved over a period of time – is that these issues have to be addressed *far* more fully and seriously than has thus far been the case in cultural studies. While I do not believe that ethnography in anthropology and cultural studies (and film studies) cannot be compatible, I *do* agree that at the present time the work carried out in cultural studies and reception studies under the banner of ethnography is *not* comparable to ethnographic work *per se*.

In response to this it might be argued that media theorists who engage in audience and reception research have, as Alasuutari has it, ‘the advantage of a very long personal field experience’ which means that ‘it is ridiculous to think of a media ethnography in terms of so-and-so many months of participation’ (1999a: 8). However, I do not find this argument especially convincing when its surface is scratched. This assumes an awful lot, for a start, about our (theorists’) abilities to distance themselves from their own experiences in what they only retrospectively term “the field;” in addition, it assumes that our familiarity with *the media texts* constitutes ‘personal field experience,’ when I am not sure this is the case at all: *Is* “the field” defined as a set of texts, as Alasuutari implies here? I would rather suggest “the field” is defined by the people whose viewing habits, interests and so on are being “studied.”

Given my position that film-experiencers should be neither treated nor conceptualized as objects (or even subjects) of study but rather as sources to be consulted and cited in the analysis and understanding of media texts, I could be seen to be on shaky ground here: I am after all both calling for proper fieldwork *and* claiming film-experiencers are not objects of study. However, I think the contradiction here exists only if one defines and understands fieldwork in a very traditional manner.

Traditionally, fieldwork has been seen and used as a way to study people *as* objects of study and to draw conclusions about them and/as their culture, beliefs, ways of life, and so on. However, such a view has been and is increasingly challenged by ethnographers who argue for instance that ‘we should take the criticisms of our subjects in much the same way that we take those of our colleagues’ (Rosaldo 1989: 50), and that “natives” should be treated more as collaborators in – or even as co-authors of (cf. Clifford) – ethnographic work rather than as objects or subjects who can be described and explained adequately from the author’s perspective.

It is in the context of such epistemological shifts that I believe fieldwork *is* necessary to adequate and accurate citation of film-experiencers in film theory and criticism. Such fieldwork, though, must involve genuine commitment to listen to and understand those about whom film theorists and critics currently hypothesize, write and otherwise express assumptions, and must result in actually citing the experiences of film-experiencers encountered “in the field,” and incorporates their experiences into theories and analyses of the film/s in question.

In essence, then, I believe that the issues raised by the 1989 comment that ‘[w]hile ethnographies are based on long-term and in-depth field work, most television audience studies have involved only brief periods of contact, in some cases less than one hour, with the informants’ (Seiter *et al* 1989b: 227) is still in desperate need of acknowledgement *and* addressing in film and other cultural studies that engage with audiences and reception work. One of my key aims in this thesis – both at a theoretical level and at the practical level of my case study – is to address such issues when considering ways in which ethnographic theories and methods have been and might be utilized in the study of films, film-experiencers and other cultural studies contexts.

With these thoughts about the relationship between cultural studies and ethnography in mind, I now investigate what I believe the appeal of ethnography to be to film studies, and then outline specific ways in which the discipline might use and benefit from ethnographic practices and ideas.

THE APPEAL OF ETHNOGRAPHY TO FILM EXPERIENCER RESEARCH

While much cultural studies work on media experiencers uses ethnographic methods, and shares ethnography’s interest in “rich descriptions” and details that come from experiencers rather than from texts, film theory is generally more interested in using totalizing models that privilege “rich descriptions” of theorists and their conception of “the gaze” rather than working from the words of people who actually gaze at films. Similarly, film criticism often disregards the experiences and descriptions of experiencers without the appropriate cultural capital, and even suggests there are objective criteria when evaluating films. Film theory and criticism therefore exhibit what might be termed a positivist edge, in that they suggest that there is, ultimately, one privileged way of telling stories about textual meaning, and that that way relies

upon textual analysis, and additionally upon having the cultural capital to carry out that analysis accurately.

Also, qualitative research is more likely than quantitative research to examine and confront the constraints of everyday life, since they 'embed their findings' in the world rather than abstracting from it (Denzin & Lincoln 5). Here, a contradiction of sorts exists within film studies. It has something in common with qualitative researchers, since it is very interested in examining and confronting everyday constraints (as represented by structural limitations on possible readings of filmic texts); however, it also shares quantitative research's desire to abstract from everyday life - by, again, working with models that impose meanings onto filmic texts in a structuralist manner.

Finally, while both qualitative research and quantitative research are interested in 'capturing the individual's point of view' (Denzin & Lincoln 5), they have quite different ways of (and aims in) so doing. Qualitative research tends to use detailed interviewing, conceptualizing the specificity and richness of that process as essential to useful knowledge production, while quantitative research relies heavily on more empiricist data. Much of film theory and film criticism subscribes to neither of these positions, however - finding its rich and specific descriptions neither in the words and actions of actual film experiencers nor in "empiricist" data about them, but rather in its own theorists, and/or their theories based on psychoanalytic, cognitive, structuralist or post-structuralist models and their hypothetical conceptions of film experiencers.

THE APPEAL OF ETHNOGRAPHY TO FILM EXPERIENCER RESEARCH

What I am *not* calling for is a replacement of textual analysis of films with contextual analysis of their audiences and interpretations (or with analyses of "the everyday"). Rather, I am proposing that any textual analysis carried out by film theorists and critics must be informed by contextual awareness of how interpretations of films are *actually* fixed in the material world by actual watchers and other experiencers. Such awareness need not preclude hypothesizing about, for instance, film experiencers' unconscious motives and pleasures. What it *would* work to avoid, however, is ungrounded and untenable assumptions about particular films, their watchers and non-watchers based purely on opinion and hypothesis; in turn, such awareness would provide a firmer basis from which to hypothesize about aspects of film experience and interpretation not directly accessible through ethnographic means.

To this end, I look at how ethnographic theory and practices might be used by and within film theory and research not only to increase understanding of how actual people experience and interpret films, but also to provide grounds on which hypothetical analyses of films might continue to take place and develop.

Participant observation in studies of film experiencers

Klinger effectively calls for more participant observation when she criticizes film theory and criticism's lack of critical or theoretical attention to in-theater responses because they are incommensurate 'with any notion of 'ideal' spectatorship' (Klinger 118). There are, though, real problems with using participant observation to learn about film experiencers – and here I consider key practical and theoretical issues thrown up by Klinger's call and the use of participant observation as a response to it.

The practical problems highlight especially clearly why it is very hard for film studies to simply appropriate ethnographic methodologies for its own purposes. For a start, it is hard to see how a researcher might engage in fully effective "participant observation" given the limitations of the in-theater setting: watching and listening to film experiencers watching and listening to a film hardly seems as useful to the researcher as watching and listening to a group of people in more varied, wider-ranging social settings (even if the researcher participates in watching the film just as she might participate as a member of the group she is observing). Specifically, the darkness of the setting can make it difficult to see much of what goes on, while the soundtrack makes it as hard to hear much of what is articulated; also, many viewers simply do not talk or react very much to films as they are screened, but rather discuss them afterwards in other venues (such as the ride home, in pubs, at home, or at work). So, while observing experiencers whilst they are actually watching films might in a literal way constitute participant observation, and has uses in accessing some responses to films, I do not think it alone is adequate in providing film theorists with experiencer responses to and views about films.

Alternatively, a researcher might choose groups of people to observe based not on their film watching activities or tendencies, but on some other grounds that makes them a recognizable group, or on grounds of some relevance to the type or genre of film/s to be researched. In a similar vein, a researcher might choose a group of people to observe, and decide which films to discuss only once she has observed which films the group members watch and/or talk about.

Participant observation has, though, been used by film theorists in a number of ways. Clover observes film experiencers not actually watching films, for instance, but when choosing and renting them on video; Hill observes her interview participants when showing them clips from two of the films she was researching; and Klinger wants film theorists to observe film experiencers in cinemas. The extent to which these methods constitute participant observation or not perhaps depend on one's perspective, and certainly on one's definition of "participant." But certainly it could be argued that some or all of them could work in ways that are commensurate with the aims and methodology of what classic ethnographers recognize as participant observation.

However, the important issue here concerns how much can be learned simply by observing people rather than interacting with them. Certainly the practice of participant observation has come under attack from ethnographers who see it as perpetuating the visualist bias of the West, and as a process that fails to give sufficient epistemological weight to what those being "observed" say, think and feel. I too have such reservations, and think it is perhaps arrogant as well as epistemologically weak to claim knowledge about others' experiences simply by observing them. This is not to dismiss Klinger's and others' calls for an awareness of the contexts in which films are watched; nor is it to dismiss Hill's and others' use of observing the body language and articulations of research participants during screenings. However, it does problematize the use of and especially reliance upon such methods, and again emphasizes the importance of developing methods of research that engage with film experiencers rather than make assumptions about them from a distance.

Participant interviews

What I find most useful and appealing about interviewing rather than "observing" participants is that it treats and gets them as more *involved* in research; I think there's a lot to be said for privileging the spoken word above the observing eye in this context, just as there is for considering aspects other than visual experience when analyzing films and their "meanings." At the same time, the problem exists that interview informants have no more power than do hypothetical "spectators" and "viewers" when it comes to how they are "written up" and analyzed by the researcher who seeks their participation in the first place. (This *need* not always be the case – some ethnographers have, for instance, asked those they are "studying" to read through, comment on and modify their work (cf. Rosaldo; Clifford 1986); however, it almost always *is* the case – as indeed it is in my case study.) This problem is exacerbated because while interview participants offer up information in the context of interpersonal

communication, researchers tend to “write up” such information in decidedly less personal ways, often using the “data” from such communications to create an abstract, categorical account of a whole range and number of similarly “personal” communications.

One way to lessen the abstraction and depersonalization of interview participant accounts is to actually cite individuals’ words rather than abstract from them – at least at some stage of the “writing up.” (This is what I am critical of Barker and Brooks for not doing enough of.) Another way is to do this and also to cite each individual by name, to recognize them as a particular source (as Stacey and Austin do). I mobilize both these practices in my case study; although I do not think these strategies alone overcome the problems of how interviews are often written up in ways that efface the particularity of individual informants, I believe they go a considerable way to alleviating their most depersonalizing, abstracting tendencies.

However, the problem still remains that much or all of what informants say in interviews is arguably so shaped by the questions asked of them, and/or by the ways in which informants think they are *expected* to respond, that even their “own words” have little value. This kind of debate is widespread, and bases for the validity of such criticisms are evident if one looks at the differences in data elicited between interviews that are highly structured and use “leading” questions, and others that are more “open.” The comparatively new discipline of discourse analysis is one of many that attempt to address such problems, and debates about how best to do so are still ongoing.⁸ While I try to keep my interviews as “open” as possible, and tried to avoid “leading” questions, I am well aware that the very nature of an interview conducted as a research tool makes such problems unavoidable, and that the data collected is “tainted” as a result. In an attempt to lessen the hidden impact of such factors on my analysis, I do present the questions I asked interview informants in my case study outline, and when presenting informant responses I indicate to what precise question or other stimulus they are responding. This strategy at least allows my reader to consider how far responses are “guided” by questions in my study, and to understand what kinds of interview technique I used during my research.

Additional issues to consider when using interview data in research projects are discussed by Bette J. Kauffman in her article, “Feminist facts: Interview strategies and

⁸ Barker and Brooks devote a whole chapter of their book to discussing potential and actual uses of Discourse Analysis in researching film “audiences.”

political subjects in ethnography” (1992). As Kauffman proposes there, I treat my ‘interview strategies’ (that is, how I and my informants ‘avoid[ed], obtain[ed], and manage[d] research interviews’) as data of direct pertinence to what I “find” and who I cite in my research project (Kauffman 187). Treating such aspects as “data” acknowledges and emphasizes the status of informants as active participants in rather than passive objects of research, and also helps to reveal how the researcher-researched relationship shapes analysis (ibid.). While this strategy is one of several key ‘feminist responses to the power problem in ethnography’ (ibid.), along with Kauffman I want to underscore the extent to which it is *not* ‘specific to feminist research’ precisely because ‘*all* researchers are political subjects’ (188), and ethnography is always political and constructed.

In considering questions of power in the researcher-researched relationship, however, it is as important not to underestimate the power of those who act as informants in interviews as it is to acknowledge the power of the researcher. This might be especially pertinent in the case of projects such as mine, where informants are not from “other,” less “developed” cultures, but often share very similar cultural practices and milieus with the researcher. Kauffman indicates the significance of such a factor when she argues that ‘an exaggerated sense of the researcher’s power has gotten in the way of seeing that research subjects also have power, power for which they are not dependent upon our generosity and self-conscious inclusiveness’ (199).

It is quite evident that while interviews have a number of advantages in research and theory that aims to present and analyze film experiencers, their experiences and the films they experience, using interview data is fraught with epistemological, methodological and ideological problems. In trying to understand and present interview data, then, we need to be aware that ‘each construction of a standpoint excludes another, conceals even as it reveals, and remains dependent on a partial, imperfect hearing of others’ (Kauffman 201), and be aware of strategies that acknowledge this and incorporate that knowledge into the analysis and interpretation as well as presentation of such data. Such problems and complexities perhaps beg the question of why interviews are worth engaging with at all given the seemingly impossible task of accessing, “writing up” and analyzing what other people – film experiencers or not – think and feel. In answer to this I would suggest that the imperfections of interview as a method of acquiring information do not outweigh its value in acquiring information from sources who would not otherwise be consulted –

especially if its imperfections are recognized and that recognition is incorporated into the presentation, interpretation and analysis of interview data.

Other ethnographic strategies

Other strategies include inviting letters from film experiencers and/or getting them to fill in questionnaires, as Stacey and Austin do, and as I do in my case study. One of the most obvious advantages of asking film experiencers to write letters about their film experiences is that researchers are less open to the pitfalls of asking “leading questions” or otherwise guiding and shaping informants’ responses. A closely related advantage is that such an approach enables film experiencers to express what they are interested in about the topic of research without feeling restricted by specific questions. This in turn can shape the researcher’s work to fit his or her responses (as with Stacey and in my own study).

A problem with letters, though, is that a researcher might not receive information about the areas in which s/he is most interested. Also, it can be frustrating when letter writers raise interesting or intriguing points but do not clarify or elaborate on what exactly they think and mean. This is something far more readily addressed during the face-to-face interaction of an interview.

Problems with questionnaires are more obvious and far-reaching, and their advantages are fairly limited. For a start, questionnaires are often quite leading by their very nature, and tend to elicit somewhat uniform responses from respondents although there are methods geared towards avoiding such tendencies. Also, though, they often leave comparatively little room and leeway for respondents to write about what interests them in particular. At the same time, if a questionnaire is designed – as in Stacey’s study – with materials already received from letter-writer (or interviewee) informants, it is possible to overcome some of these problems.

FILM EXPERIENCERS &/AS COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The communities of practice model (CofP model) was developed by Etienne Wenger (1998) because of dissatisfaction with the speech community model felt especially within the field of sociolinguistics. The speech community model is defined around a group of people who have a shared valued way of speaking. In 1972, developing the model from “within” linguistics and sociology, Dell Hymes proposed that the speech

community rather than a language or dialect is the 'natural [sic] unit for sociolinguistic taxonomy' (Hymes 43). In setting up the model, Hymes was trying to address the problem that no 'mode of the description of language with social life' had yet been established to provide knowledge (38) - something he saw as an 'empirical problem' (39) that might be addressed by combining theoretical work and fieldwork to explain the descriptions of speech communities and their particular codes of language use. In contrast, the CofP model - developed some twenty years later - focuses on the distinctive *practices* of its members rather than on their ways of speaking. Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff note that while the speech community model emphasizes shared norms and may be defined externally, the CofP model emphasizes shared practices and is defined internally by its members (178-79). They also point out that there's '[a]n actively constructed dependence of personal and group identities' in the CofP model, whereas the speech community model's not concerned with individuals' identities (179). The CofP model can also be linked to social constructionist approaches to culture because of its focus on activity and (therefore) agency. As Holmes and Meyerhoff articulate it, CofP 'offers a potentially productive means of linking micro-level and macro-level analyses' because its level of analysis 'encourages a focus on social diversity while simultaneously facilitating the perception of subtle yet meaningful patterns' (181).

The extent of the significant differences between the speech community and CofP models is open to debate. Some opinions on the matter seem to stem from whether people are more familiar with the Hymesian or alternative models of speech communities, and also on how useful they felt the different emphases of the CofP model might be to their own work. In general, I do think there are significant differences between the two models - as will become evident below - although I also feel that sometimes the differences are over-stated by the proponents of CofPs. However, what is important for this study is to identify what is useful from each model and work with it, rather than debating the finer points of their differences or lack of them.

Film experiencers, CofPs & speech communities

While elements of the Hymesian speech community model - especially its concept of culture and emphasis on 'situated meaning' (Hymes 37) - are appropriate to the project of studying films, its singular focus on shared valued ways of *speaking*, and on rules of speaking, render its specific approach to accessing, analyzing, and understanding culture, social groups and individuals of little direct use to film studies. For one thing,

like theorists who prefer the CofP to the speech community model, studies of films and their viewers look not only or even primarily at language, but also at non-linguistic social practices. Also central to film studies - and my project - is the critical paradigm, and as Mary Bucholtz points out, the speech community model uses social information to account for changes in its (linguistic) data, rather than using its data 'illuminate the social world' (Bucholtz 204), revealing its more "descriptive" than critical approach. Bucholtz also highlights the speech community model's inadequacies and inappropriateness in addressing 'questions of identity' (204) - especially gendered identity - which are important issues in film theory and criticism, as well as in my project.

In addition to these general obstacles to using the speech community model, the six "inadequacies" Bucholtz identifies in it are not only significant in themselves, but strike a chord in terms of what I find problematic in film studies' approach to film watchers. Bucholtz criticizes the model for privileging (i) language versus social practice; (ii) consensus versus conflict; (iii) central versus marginal members; (iv) groups versus individuals; (v) identity categories versus identity practices; and for (vi) using a top-down rather than bottom-up approach (207-210). Film theory might well be accused of a similar set of emphases: it is certainly guilty of privileging abstract systems of analysis over social practice; groups (of "ideal" spectators or social "groups") over individuals (actual experiencers); and identity categories over identity practices in its use of analytic, generalizing constructs such as psychoanalysis and apparatus theory to investigate and draw conclusions about its viewers in the abstract. Similarly, film theory - as reception, fan and star studies are painfully aware - privileges central rather than marginal experiencers in its analyses, where it regularly collapses individual difference into the homogeneity of "the spectator." Also, I would argue that film theory is guilty of privileging consensus over conflict in its concepts of "the spectator," even if not (always) in its concepts of society and culture. That is, while it rarely 'assumes a consensus model of society that is at odds with a long-standing tradition of social theory' (Bucholtz 208), it often underplays conflicts between different viewers' readings of the same films when analyzing film-spectator relationships (and thus filmic *meanings*) based on limited conceptions of who viewers are, how they function, and what their differences might be and mean.

But of Bucholtz's six criticisms, film theory is perhaps most guilty of privileging a top-down over a bottom-up approach to film experiencers. Certainly the majority of approaches and theories in film theory and criticism privilege analysts' views over

those of experiencers: Only in some areas of reception, star and fan studies are viewer identities studied and represented 'from the point of view of the individuals who enact' them (Bucholtz 210). Since this is a key issue I am trying to address by bringing input from film experiencers to inform textual analysis, one of my aims is clearly to embrace an approach in which 'local interpretations [are] central to the analysis' (Bucholtz 210). That said, I think it is disingenuous for any proponent of critical theory to claim to be engaged in an entirely "bottom-up" analysis, since the very process of "analysis" immediately imposes the analyst's view on some level, even if their emphasis remains with the participants. The impossibility of interpretation-free analysis and research is pertinent here. Also, I think that for an approach to be critical, it needs to step back, as it were, and both interpret and be willing to recognize that interpretation is essential to and effectively inseparable from analysis.

Given my agreement with many of Bucholtz's claims about the speech community model's inadequacies, it is evident that I do not find the model of much use to a film theory that incorporates film experiencers into its analytic and critical projects. In contrast, the CofP model holds attractions for my project, not least because its approach is more readily identified as critical, and its emphasis is on social practices of all sorts rather than focussed on language. So, when a CofP is defined by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) 'simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages' (cited Holmes & Meyerhoff 174), it seems as if it might well work as a model with which to approach a disparate collection of disparate watchers linked primarily (or perhaps only) by their shared activity of watching certain films, types of films, or a particular individual film. However, the practice that a film experiencer is engaged in when watching the same film as other film experiencers is *not* a "shared" one in the sense that the CofP model defines it. Wenger identifies three central dimensions to the model, as follows: (i) mutual engagement, which 'typically involves regular interaction' as its basis; (ii) a joint negotiated enterprise, where such an enterprise is a *process*, 'not just a shared stated goal;' and (iii) a shared repertoire of resources (including linguistic resources) aimed at negotiating meaning - something that develops over time when it is mutually engaged in pursuit of a joint enterprise' (Holmes & Meyerhoff 176). Wenger also emphasizes that a CofP has a variety of members who range from "core" to "peripheral" depending on 'how successfully an individual has acquired the shared repertoire, or assimilated the goals of the joint enterprise, or established patterns of engagement with other members' (Holmes & Meyerhoff 176).

Specifics such as these make it far more difficult to argue that any collection of film watchers constitutes a CofP in the sense that the model defines and understands itself. For a start, many of the watchers (and non-watchers) in such a “community” have never met, let alone negotiated and articulated a shared joint enterprise with each other (or other film experiencers). And while many film watchers have what might be termed a “shared repertoire” to negotiate and articulate the meanings of films (for instance the understanding of how suspense is built up, what certain point of view shots imply, and ways in which to articulate such an understanding) - and this repertoire develops over time spent engaged in that practice as well as reading and talking about it - this is clearly not what the CofP model means by a shared repertoire gained by regular interaction and mutual engagement in pursuit of a joint, negotiated enterprise. Overall, it seems the similarities and parallels between a CofP and collections of film experiencers are sufficient neither in quantity nor in type to apply the term CofP accurately or productively to groups united only by virtue of watching the same films. In fact, Wenger briefly considers the applicability of his model to television “viewers,” writing that:

Communities of practice are not the only kind of community to consider when exploring the formation of identities. Indeed, calling the viewers of a television program a community of practice, for instance, would be pushing the concept beyond its usefulness. Viewers know that there are others – perhaps millions - who watch the same show, but it is only through their imagination that they can conceive of their viewing as membership in such a collectivity. And if, for a given time, a number of people tune to a certain channel, gaze at the screen, and watch the same show, this kind of alignment derives only from the distribution of television sets and programs, not from the mutual relations involved in the negotiation of a shared practice (181).

One could perhaps force the issue - insisting for instance that watchers of similar texts *are* mutually engaged precisely by virtue of watching certain texts, and that their purpose *is* joint, even if not consciously negotiated in person. But there does not seem to be any necessity for or benefit in taking such an approach. Rather, it seems more productive to see how the CofP model might benefit film studies, and to also consider how aspects of it might be worked with to develop a model useful to film studies more directly.

Using the CofP model in film studies

Arguably, the term CofP is applicable to groups of film experiencers who join together on a regular basis to watch certain films in which they have a shared interest if (i) mutual engagement is defined as their actually meeting and watching the films; (ii) their shared negotiated enterprise is interpreted as their organizing themselves into a

viewing and discussion group; and (iii) they share a repertoire of resources to negotiate the meaning/s of the films they watch - resources which might include shared understandings of how particular cinematic codes work as well as shared linguistic resources with which to articulate and discuss such codes and their meaning/s. A fairly formalized CofP of this type might be the group of people who attend the film studies evening class run by Sheffield Hallam University and the Showroom Cinema: Certainly this group is engaged in a 'mutual endeavor,' constituted as much by its practice as by its membership (Holmes & Meyerhoff 174; cf. Lave & Wenger). Also, it provides a clear example of how '[t]he process of becoming a member of a CofP involves learning,' that 'a CofP inevitably involves the acquisition of socio-linguistic competences,' and that there is a difference between being a "peripheral member" and, 'later perhaps... a core member' (Holmes & Meyerhoff 174). Also, I would argue that a group of experiencers who watch films independently in a geographical sense but who come together on the Internet to discuss the films and their meanings (on, for instance, electronic bulletin boards and in chat rooms) constitute a CofP - albeit a "hyperreal" one. As Denise Bielby and C. Lee Harrington show in a study of television viewers, groups engaged in such activity appropriate 'selected cultural resources' to 'generate meaning during reception,' and that 'by analyzing [such] networks of interaction, we can explore how groups construct meanings by drawing upon gossip, news, speculation, queries, and reactions' (83; see also Schultz). In my case study, I make some use of Internet sources when investigating how martial arts film watchers converse talk to each other about the films, their stars, and their meanings.

In addition to applying the CofP model to certain groups of film watchers, the model can be used to study experiencer perceptions and receptions of films and related phenomena in another way. That is, a theorist might investigate the attitudes towards films, film stars, and so on in a CofP defined not by its watching choices but by some other uniting practice. Further, s/he can choose whether to study a CofP engaged in a practice of some direct relevance to the film/s she is studying, or some other practice. In my own case study, I try to use CofPs in both ways when I interview members of Hawkeye Tae Kwon Do: they are all members of the same CofP *and* that CofP has some direct relevance to the types of films about which I enquire.

Further, the CofP model could be used in a way similar to that outlined by Alice F. Freed in her article about pregnant women. Freed focuses on how CofPs (doctors, for example) 'routinely construct for women what her pregnancy is to consist of - often

trying to make of it a monolithic experience,' while the women's stories actually reveal that '[t]hey show no signs of having been engaged in common activities, and there are few linguistic and social commonalities among them' (257). As such, Freed not only highlights what a CofP is *not*, but also that many people make erroneous and often highly problematic assumptions about what renders an individual a member of a particular CofP. Freed's work thus emphasizes CofP's key value in insisting on 'local practices and concrete activities' - an insistence that can help researchers avoid a *priori* characterization of individuals as well as generalizations about social categories (257). What this does for film theory and criticism is remind us that people are *not* necessarily similar because of a shared practice such as watching martial arts films, even though they are often written, talked and thought about as a comparatively homogeneous group by many film theorists, critics and policy makers. In turn, this makes all the more urgent the need to allow room for individual and group differences within any group of watchers defined primarily by the film/s they watch. In obtaining a balance between structure and agency in film theory and audience research, then, theorists should keep in mind that just as 'no single objective meaning or reality exists for the experience of pregnancy outside of the particular sociopolitical context in which it occurs' (Freed 270), so no single objective meaning or reality exists for the experience of watching a certain film or genre outside of the particular and varied sociopolitical contexts in which film experiences occur.

In "Audiencing," Fiske talks about a group of people who come together to watch *Married...With Children* on television each Sunday evening and defines them as a "social formation" rather than a "social category" since:

A social category holds its members constantly within its conceptual grip; a social formation is formed and dissolved more fluidly, according to its contextual conditions. It is identified by what its members do rather than by what they are, and as such is better able to account nonreductively for the complexities and contradictions of everyday life in a highly elaborated society (192).

This logic echoes that producing the distinction between speech communities and CofPs discussed above. What it does not do, though, is get us any nearer theorizing - or naming - a group of viewers who do not come together in physical space to watch the same film/s. It seems essential in this age of Internet chat rooms, bulletin boards etcetera that theorists include such phenomena in their discussions about what might or might not constitute whatever social "category," "formation," or whatever they propose as a unit of analysis. The "social formation" to which Fiske refers would seem equally applicable to a group of people regularly involved in chatting on the Internet

about a specific programme, for instance. But theorists are often wary of allowing the same kind of status to mass mediated social groups as they allow groups who spend time together in the same geographical space, so this issue could do with more attention.

It seems, then, that the CofP model might be utilized by film theorists in several different ways, and that certain groups of film watchers can be defined and studied as CofPs (and in ways that do not depart too radically, if at all, from the way in which the model is understood in ethnography). However, the problem remains that not all film watchers are part of the CofPs that I have just described - in fact, one of the key problems for film theory is arguably that fewer film watchers than television watchers participate in such group activities, making such a model less useful to film theorists than to other mass media theorists. (That is, it seems more common for groups of people to come together on a regular basis to watch television programmes than to watch films because television programmes are regularly scheduled occurrences; so, chat rooms and bulletin boards about television programmes get the chance to occur regularly and thus to develop over time.) Also, it seems legitimate to not want to confine a study only - or even primarily - to self-defined groups of watchers when trying to access a range of individual if socially shaped readings of films. With this in mind, the CofP model might be developed to produce a model that focuses on the *practice of watching* as the defining aspect of its membership, without committing the oversimplistic error of seeing all people who watch martial arts films as members of the same CofP, speech community, social category or social formation.

Appropriating the CofP model for film studies

Clearly the nature of films needs to be addressed in any attempt to produce a genuinely helpful model for studying and conceptualizing film experiencers. What is particularly difficult here - as evidenced by film theory's multiple attempts to get to grips with what and how film experiencers think and feel - is that while watching films is an "activity," film experiencers' activities are not all visible or directly accessible to theorists. While film watchers might talk through films or talk "to" them, and might scream in response to images on the screen, squirm in embarrassment at sex scenes, or even make out in the back row and ignore most of a film's images and sounds, it is evident that much of the "activity" of film experience takes place "inside" the viewer, in her thoughts and feelings about, and general "making sense of" the film while it is playing out in front of her eyes and ears, and at moments before and after she watches it. It is because of this "internal" nature of much of the activity of experiencing

films that I think interviews, questionnaire responses and similarly communication-oriented strategies are of vital use to film theorists who want to access film experiences that are not evident to the “observing” eye.

Because much of film experiencing activity takes place “internally,” I think it is more justifiable to refer to groups of watchers across diverse physical locations, since the “internal” practices in which they participate can be “shared” despite their physical distance from each other. In this sense, people who watch the same film/s might be said to be communities engaged in the same practice, but the status of the “communities” of which they form a part is virtual, or hyperreal rather than concrete or fixed. And, since the only identifiable shared practice is the watching of a particular film or set of films, any reference to a “virtual community of watchers of X” cannot be paralleled directly to *actual* CofPs (or to speech communities), since the activities and ways of speaking engaged in and valued by each member of such a virtual community are as likely to be disparate as they are to be shared or similar. Unlike the pregnant women studied by Freed, who show *no* ‘signs of being engaged in common activities’ (Freed 257), many people who watch martial arts films *do* show such signs, by virtue of the fact that they are engaged in the common activity of watching martial arts films. At the same time, the particular ways in which these experiencers might engage in this activity and make sense of it might vary considerably, and certainly it would be unlikely that *all* the watchers would share similar resources - including linguistic ones - to negotiate the meaning of the film and their experiences of it. Virtual communities of watchers, then, might be defined by the relatively simple characteristic of their mutual engagement in the practice of watching the same film or set of films (defined perhaps by genre, star performer, or some other criterion). Like CofPs, such groups would be defined ‘simultaneously by [their] membership and by the practice in which that membership engages’ (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 464, qtd. Holmes and Meyerhoff 174), where the only practice in question would be that of watching the same film/s. Also similar to CofPs would be these group members’ involvement in learning how to practice watching certain film/s and the development of resources to understand and articulate such an experience. What is different, centrally, is that while in a CofP members look primarily to each other to learn and develop community-oriented skills, members of such groups might tend to look to the film/s themselves and other media texts (such as magazines) to learn and develop such skills, although these might be supplemented by engaging in related CofPs such as those in chat rooms on the Internet.

To this end I propose that “hyperreal communities of watchers” might be a useful term with which to refer to a group of film experiencers who watch the same film or set of films, whether or not they know or ever see each other. In contrast, the CofP model might be applied only to a group of film experiencers *either* if they regularly join together as a group to watch and/or discuss films, *or* if they watch films and regularly come together in an Internet site to discuss films. Otherwise, the CofP model is useful to film theory primarily in terms of emphasizing what people who just watch the same film or set of films are *not* (that is, you are not a member of a CofP only by virtue of which film/s you watch).

Having discussed a number of ways in which ethnographic theories and methods might be used in or appropriated by film studies, and suggested reasons that they might benefit film theory and criticism, in Part III I present my case study of martial arts action cinema as perceived by film experiencers. The study utilizes several of the approaches I discuss in this chapter, and considers their specific usefulness and problems in the context of actual film experiencer consultation. But while Chapter 4 discusses such issues in the context of outlining how I conducted, designed and wrote up my study, Chapter 5 is concerned almost exclusively with citing what actual film experiencers write and say about martial arts action cinema.

PART III:
CASE STUDY: EXPERIENCES
OF MARTIAL ARTS ACTION CINEMA

*'critical practice recognizes that the critic is already within
the space of the field, implicated in his or her own stories'*

- Lawrence Grossberg

CHAPTER 4: CONDUCTING, DESIGNING & WRITING UP THE RESEARCH

In the title of this chapter my sequencing of conducting, designing and writing up very deliberately places “conducting” before “designing,” although of course part of the research design was established before I handed out any questionnaires or conducted any interviews since I had to have a set of questions to ask. Overall, though, much of the design of this project – and *all* that I learned about designing such a project – was done as the research was being conducted: In a very real sense my research design, technique and methodology was changed and developed by my experiences of research – as well, of course, as by my reading about and around such research.

As suggested in the previous chapter, this experience is neither particularly surprising nor unusual, especially in the context of more recent approaches and attitudes to ethnographic research. Many contemporary (and some more traditional) ethnographers write about their experiences of developing research design in the field, while others suggest this approach is essential if one is to explain and contextualize findings adequately and/or treat informants as collaborators rather than as subjects of study. Such a context certainly makes me feel justified in designing *and changing* so much over the last four years; it does not, however, get close to a full or honest explanation of how and why my particular research design – and some of its particular aims - changed so much and so regularly while the research itself was being conducted.

The primary reason for such changes was that I entered into this project with a deliberately exploratory attitude and intent: My remit was not just to carry out research on experiencers and experiences of martial arts action cinema, but to investigate different ways in which such research might productively be carried out, and specifically which methods from ethnography might be useful. In addition, the very fact that I approached this project from a background in the deeply theoretical disciplines of philosophy, literature and film studies meant that I had *very* little knowledge – let alone experience – of how ethnography or other “audience” research was actually carried out. This lack of experience may well be evident to my reader, and of course brings with it a number of disadvantages. However, this lack of experience gives me the advantage of not being already committed (or used) to one particular method of research.

PARTICIPANT-INFORMANTS

I interviewed fifty-four people for this study, five of whom chose to remain anonymous, and thirty-six of whom are named as sources in the works cited section. Of the remaining thirteen, one is listed as anonymous because I misplaced her signed permission to be named (Anon. #2); and twelve were lost to technical disasters (recordings too distorted to transcribe were the normal problem here – although I also fell foul of a mysteriously erased tape and a corrupted disk). I also received fourteen letters from named informants, and cite eleven questionnaire respondents, where those respondents filled in particularly long and detailed responses despite being unable or unwilling to arrange interview times. (These informants completed questionnaires after I had finished my MA research, and are not from the 207 responses collected at that time.) In total, I cite sixty-seven participant-informants in this study, where sixty-one are named sources.

FINDING PARTICIPANT-INFORMANTS

As with other researchers in the field, it was not always easy to find people to participate in individual or group interviews, and I would most likely have carried out far more interviews had this not been a problem. I wanted initially neither to focus on specific 'sub-groups' of martial arts action film experiencers, nor to make what might be termed a 'representative' study of them. Instead, much as Barker & Brooks claim, I wanted to keep a focus on heterogeneity and avoid selecting respondents in ways that 'might pre-classify their expected responses' (Barker & Brooks 19). With this in mind, in 1996 I posted ads around the University of Iowa campus, local video stores and a couple of coffee shops to attract responses from the widest range of people possible in Iowa City, as well as asking around my own acquaintances, colleagues and friends. The results of this provided me with a considerable range of informants, but the majority of those willing to be interviewed (as opposed to those willing to fill in a questionnaire) were either involved in martial arts themselves, worked in the places I'd posted ads, or came from groups with which I was already in some way involved (my own students, fitness instructors and aerobics class informants). On my return to England I found similar patterns: People I knew already through shared interests, and people I approached in stores I already frequented were willing to participate, while getting complete strangers involved was nigh on impossible. These difficulties have been shared by many other experienter researchers, including Barker, Brooks and Hill. Other researchers, including Jackie Stacey, have found that requesting letters

from strangers seems to get a good result. And sure enough, the only really effective way I found to get complete strangers to participate was by writing an open letter to the letters page of *Impact* (a UK-based action film magazine)¹ outlining my interests and asking people to write to me about martial arts action films, their stars and their watchers.

Hawkeye Tae Kwon Do, Iowa City

Eighteen informants in this project are (or were) members of the Hawkeye Tae Kwon Do Club in Iowa City, Iowa. I was an active member of that club in 1996 and 1999, and welcomed the opportunity to not only interview other club members but listen to their conversations about films. I cannot emphasize enough the extent to which my own active participation as a club member influenced – and I believe assisted – my research. On a pragmatic level it made people far more willing to talk with me in the context of an interview, and also made them as oblivious as possible to my status as a researcher when talking about films among themselves. On a different level, my understanding of what members had to say in interviews, and how they said it, was enhanced massively by my being part of the same “group” as them. I not only understood references they made, colloquialisms they used, and so on, but shared a number of the anxieties they expressed about for instance the perceptions of people not engaged in martial arts about people who do practice them, and about the role media representations of martial arts plays in such anxieties. Such admissions inevitably raise issues of “going native” under discussion in ethnography, and certainly opinions differ as to whether “going native” is possible let alone desirable. However, given the shift engendered by cultural studies away from studying “other” cultures (traditional ethnography) to studying our own cultures (cultural studies, more recent moves in ethnography, etc.), this is a very different issue for me than for researchers who decide to study groups of people or practices with which they do not identify...

Other martial artists

Of the eighteen members of Hawkeye Tae Kwon Do who participated, five also practiced other martial arts; in addition, sixteen other martial artists participated in my research. Some of these martial artists responded to my ads in video stores; some wrote to me; and others were in the kickboxing class I took in Iowa. I also interviewed four informants at kickboxing tournaments in Iowa. These were not events at which it was easy to ask people for interviews about martial arts films; I did however manage to carry out a few short interviews.

¹ I also wrote to two mainstream film magazines, but neither of them printed my letter.

Fitness instructors and video store clerks

Although I did not originally intend to focus my informant interviews around specific groups of people – wanting to aim for as much heterogeneity as possible – for various reasons I ended up with six fitness/aerobics instructors and seven video store workers participating in my research project. The fact that most of my public notices asking for informants went up in gyms and leisure centers as well as in stores I frequent ended up as a more significant factor in determining who participated than I had anticipated. At the same time, the mere physical location of such notices did not necessarily ensure this result. I discuss below the motives research informants articulated and implied for taking part in my research; I also consider the impact these motives have – or might have – on the information I cite in my case study. For now, though, I simply want to indicate that a significant, if small proportion of informants come from these two groups.

Other participant-informants

The other informants in my research were either undergraduate students at the University of Iowa in 1996 and 1999 or people who responded to my request for informants because of their interest in martial arts films and/or their stars. Some of these informants took part in interviews with me, while others wrote me letters in response to a letter I wrote to *Impact* magazine in an attempt to glean responses from film experiencers not already acquainted with me and/or involved in similar communities of practice as me.

Other sources of film experiences

Individuals writing on Internet sites are potentially valuable sources of information and/as experience in projects such as this one. That said, such experiencers are not *participant*-informants because, quite simply, they have not had the opportunity to choose to participate or not participate in the research since they have no knowledge of it. Such sources provide instances of film experiences that are perhaps particularly useful to compare to those elicited by the interviews, questionnaires and other aspects of more direct research. The independence of these experiences from any research project is potentially valuable since it means they could provide a set of experiences against which to “test” those gathered direct from participant-informants. I consider ways in which such sources might be useful below; however, this project does not include such sources, focusing rather on informants who *chose* to participate.

WHY PEOPLE PARTICIPATED

The questions these practical difficulties raised about the process of studying film experiences and experiencers were amongst the most fascinating - if exasperating - aspects of this research project; they are also of central importance not only to understanding my “findings” but to understanding the difficulties and limitations of conducting this kind of research. It became evident to me that those most willing to talk about martial arts action cinema were those who felt that a) they welcomed the opportunity to talk (or write) about something about which they feel strongly; b) they wanted to help *me* out; and/or c) they felt that they needed to either attack or defend the martial arts action cinema, its stars, and/or its viewers, especially when they saw their perception by others as being affected by that cinema and what it represents. These three categories are not simple, and need unpacking – as does the reasoning behind my assertion of them as motivations for informants in my research:

- a) Many informants – especially those who wrote in response to my letter to *Impact* – clearly relished the opportunity to talk or write about a film, star or other aspect of martial arts action cinema that they enjoy very much. Often people would express their love of the martial arts action cinema, or a particular star or stars involved in it. Occasionally a informant’s prime motivation appeared to be to attack the films or their stars. Whether positive or negative about the cinema in question, though, a considerable proportion of informants clearly welcomed the opportunity to express their opinions about something they either enjoy or loathe. This is interesting when considering what kinds of pleasures people get from films so often dismissed by theorists, critics and others; it certainly seems that people do want to express their views and have them recognized and recorded rather than ignored or characterized by reviewers, academics, and others.
- b) A large number of informants clearly volunteered to be interviewed to “help me out,” and I am grateful to them all for that, since without such generosity research of this sort would likely never be done. (The thought of offering financial or other incentives to prospective interviewees is frightening – not only because it raises all kinds of extra issues surrounding the validity of data and the ethics of its collection, but because I can’t imagine having the financial backing available to provide such incentives.) That said, most informants were also motivated by their desire to talk about the subject for reasons I outline here in sections (a) and (c). In this section, though, I want to emphasize the

participation of those who volunteered to be interviewed not because they had any interest in the cinema under discussion, but because they responded to my request to hear from even those who were *not* familiar with martial arts action cinema.

A considerable number of informants seemed to participate primarily to be helpful - to offer me support in a research project - irrespective of their own interest (or lack of interest) in martial arts action cinema. This was particularly evident in the case of the largely female group of fitness instructors/aerobics class participants who volunteered to be interviewed despite knowing little or nothing about martial arts action cinema, and having little or no interest in it. For me this group was invaluable, even though their responses were often comparatively brief and uninformed about martial arts action cinema *per se*: their primary value came from the ways in which their lack of *direct* experience of the films about which they were talking provided me with information about how people who do not watch martial arts action films (whether by deliberate choice or more by circumstance) think and talk about them, their stars and their viewers – that is, about how people who are not familiar with the films themselves experience them. As such, these informants were particularly useful in shedding light on assumptions made about the films, their stars, viewers and “content,” and in distinguishing between ideas of the films and the films themselves.

- c) The third main motivation I identified from informant responses was a desire to enter into what informants see as an ongoing public debate about “violent” films and their “effects” on those who watch them. Whether from the perspective of an avid martial arts action viewer, a martial arts practitioner, or someone less “close” to the focal points of my study, many informants had plenty to say about these issues – and welcomed the chance to say it in what many of them clearly regarded as a “legitimate,” academic context. A large number of informants who practice martial arts fall into this category, since many of them were concerned to either defend martial arts action cinema (and its watchers) against criticisms of being “gratuitously violent” and/or incitant to violent behaviour in viewers, or to attack martial arts cinema (or some of it) for not representing martial arts “accurately” or “truthfully” in these respects. While these two positions – and all those around and in between them – seem quite different, the similarities are clear: Many informants want to challenge what

they see as widely held beliefs about the “violence” of martial arts action cinema and its viewers, and/or martial arts and their practitioners, even if they have different ways of mounting such a challenge.

It was rare for an participant to display only one of these general “motives” to participate in my research: Most informants who wanted to address preconceptions about martial arts action cinema and /or martial arts, for instance, also wanted to talk about the films because they enjoy them; similarly, most informants whose main motive seemed to be to talk about something they enjoyed also often commented on the “violence” question. And even in the case of those who responded primarily to help me out, many informants again had some degree of interest in the films themselves, their stars, or their viewers – or in the debates surrounding “media violence” that they saw as pertinent to the cinema about which I was asking for participant input.

MY OWN PARTICIPATION

After establishing fairly early on that my informants were often motivated by personal involvement with that which is represented in martial arts action cinema – that is, martial arts – I decided to take up a martial art and see if I could gain any further insight into this wide-ranging “group” of people. After taking tae kwon do and kickboxing for a short time I realized that I stood to learn a great deal more about what martial arts practitioners thought of martial arts action cinema as a member of a community of martial arts practitioners than I could have hoped to have learned as an academic researcher otherwise detached from the practice. Having already decided to continue in tae kwon do because I enjoyed it, I approached the University club organizer, Ned Ashton, and asked if he would mind if I asked club members to volunteer as interview participants. It was never a problem with him, and on four occasions in 1996 and 1999 I outlined my project and asked for informants when announcements were made to club members at the end of a night’s training. Each announcement was very brief, so I relied heavily on club members following up my request by asking for further information before committing to an interview.

RANGE AND LIMITATIONS OF PARTICIPANT INFORMANTS

The range of ways in which I searched for and found interview and other informants means that a considerable degree of heterogeneity is evident in those I cite in this project. At the same time, the limitations of my participant-informant group are many. Of the participant-informants I cite, only four are Black, five are Asian, and one is

Hispanic; the rest are all White Americans or Europeans (although it is important to note that I do not know the racial/ethnic identity of twelve informants). The majority of informants are American: Forty-nine are from the US, seventeen are from the UK, and one is from Australia.

Very nearly all the informants who gave their age are between 19 and 35 (of whom thirty-two are under 25), with only six under 19 years old, and only two aged 36 or over. Sixteen informants did not give their age. While eighteen informants are (or were) members of Hawkeye Tae Kwon Do, and an additional sixteen informants practice (or have practiced) martial arts elsewhere, twenty-three informants had never done any martial arts, and the remaining ten informants did not clarify whether they practice or not.

Many informants have at least some undergraduate level education, and as such have above-average education. Indeed, three informants are PhD students, several are pursuing master's level qualifications, while one is a dentist and another is a barrister. That said, a look through the list of informants reveals that at least twenty informants are employed in manual or blue collar jobs. In the context of what is written about action film watchers by so many critics and reviewers, I think it is particularly important to have informants with a range of educational levels included in this study: This both shows that an ability to express ideas and opinions about films and their meanings is not linked straightforwardly to educational level, and goes some way to avoid the problems I raise with studies (such as Hill's) in which most informants are highly educated but whose conclusions do not address the implications of this.

Only four participant informants identified themselves as gay, and just one said she is bisexual, although again this was not information I required of research informants so the figure might not be accurate. My concerns about providing this information, though, are not founded on worries that the numerical figures I give might be slightly off; my concerns revolve instead around questions I have about the significance of information such as the age, racial identity and sexual orientation of informants. While I am absolutely committed to a feminist-informed critical paradigm that holds that social identity categories are essentially important to critical analysis, I must admit that this research project has made me re-think commonly held notions about the ways in which – and even the extent to which – these categories *as they stand* are useful to critical analysis. That is, while I think an individual informant's status as, for instance, an older gay white male office worker or a young black female cleaner, is important to

consider when discussing and interpreting his/her responses to research questions, I am not convinced that the generalizations that so often stem from such considerations are valid or especially significant: I might be able to make generalizations about “female” or “Asian” film experiencers who watch (or don’t watch) martial arts action films, for instance, but those *always* work only by glossing over – or rather obliterating all the individual female or Asian film experiencers who defy the generalizations.

As Rosaldo writes with regard to social criticism as a whole and ethnography in particular, there is an extremely tiny gap ‘between objective characterization and objectifying caricature’ (54); since recognizing this problem is perhaps *the* primary motivation for my research project in the first place, I find it particularly difficult to identify and claim with any real epistemological conviction that characterizations of film experiencers by social category are valid or even particularly useful - even if they *are* based on empirical consultation with film experiencers rather than on hypothesizing of the sort implemented by spectatorship theorists. My difficulty in this area is *not* fully resolved in this project, and I am not convinced it is fully resolvable. I also think it is clearly impacted by the structure/agency debate, which I refer to in Chapter 3, because it is of course caught up with issues of how far an individual can exert their “agency” at odds with ways in which their position/identity exists in the social “structure.” All I can say about this is that I think it brings age-old philosophical questions about the status of the “self” back to the forefront of discussion, and also that while I remain committed to the notion that structure *is* massively important in shaping and delimiting each individual’s so-called agency, my research with actual film experiencers has made me query the whole set of assumptions about the structure/agency relationship that underlie much theoretical work on film experiencers as well as human subjects more generally.

RESEARCH TOOLS & STRATEGIES

INDIVIDUAL VERSUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

Another issue that warrants discussion is why the majority of the interviews I conducted were with individuals rather than with “focus groups,” where the latter approach is more common in audience and reception research.

I should first state that when asking for informants I always stated that I welcomed either individuals or small groups, and that I would set up groups for any individuals

who would prefer group interviews. As a result of this I set up one group interview at my gym in Iowa City (all four women in the group had volunteered independently) and interviewed two young women together at Hawkeye Tae Kwon Do. In addition I interviewed three kickboxers together in Iowa after a tournament because it was the only opportunity I had to talk to them. Other than that, informants opted to be interviewed on an individual rather than group basis. While for some this decision was based primarily on practical considerations (if, for instance, they wanted to fit the interview into their lunch hour, or simply didn't have much free time), some others expressed their preference to speak as an individual rather than for instance, 'just one of a group – y'know, just some guy who does karate' (Riley). Even when this preference was not stated explicitly, I got a sense that informants quite liked the idea of being cited by name as a source, and of being listened to (indeed, transcribed) on an individual basis rather than as part of a focus group.

While I do not deny the benefits of group interviews and the access such processes allow into socio-linguistic dynamics and the like, I feel that the largely individual interviews I carried out have benefits of their own: Not least, I believe that talking to people on a one-to-one basis and citing them by name as one would any other source (unless they wish to remain anonymous) gives more authority and credence to their views *as individuals* rather than as members of a group – as a member of “the audience.” Certainly I felt that most of the informants in this research project appreciated the opportunity to be cited individually and by name (despite initial reservations about “saying something stupid” or even being made to appear stupid, which were fairly widespread), and as such be accorded some status as an individual rather than simply ‘just one of a group’ (Ibid.). This may well reflect their shared (if implicit) knowledge that ‘we all engage in naturalistic generalization routinely’ (Gomm, Hammersley & Foster 104), and the consequent desire to be cited precisely as an individual and not rather to have one’s words used to fuel more general(ized) conclusions made by me.

In addition, it seems to me that if I want to argue that all “readings” of films are anyway just the author’s “reception” of it, then all of those people whose individual “reception” we cite should be named as sources.

RESEARCH TOOLS

In designing the questions I asked participant-informants I was aiming to get a balance between asking them open-ended questions that would enable them to respond in

ways as unaffected by my own particular interests and biases as is possible, and asking them questions that they could actually respond to effectively and confidently. It was particularly difficult to achieve a balance between asking questions that were too general to elicit confident responses from informants, and questions that were so specific as to be too leading or limiting in terms of possible responses.

I started out by reading works about discourse analysis and looking at other researchers' research designs. Eventually, though, I used a very *ad hoc* approach to the issue of which questions to ask, especially in interview contexts. I always asked the "guideline" interview questions (reproduced below), although not always the ones in parentheses. But usually, each interview ended up branching out from those questions in different ways, and sometimes this affected the order in which I asked the questions, and/or the extent to which I added questions appropriate to the individual interviewee. One of the most significant aspects affecting the extent to which I added questions was, quite simply, the individual interviewee's talkativeness: Some people gave me an hour-long interview from the stimulus of just the questions I wrote down as guidelines for my self; others needed more prompting and encouragement to speak for just twenty minutes. I have included a few transcribed interviews in Appendix A to give a sense of how differently interviews based around the same key questions actually went, but overall I am happy with the way in which the interviews went. I also think it is perhaps for discourse analysts to critique the ways in which my research was conducted if they so choose: Overall, I am confident that I allowed informants to express their opinions as and when they wanted to, and did not ask questions that were problematically leading. I do, though, think that the questionnaire is more leading – or perhaps just more limiting, and overall was not convinced that questionnaires are a particularly effective tool for qualitative research involving film experiencers. One thing that made me realize this was the extent to which the 207 questionnaire responses I collected for my MA project had a very limited range of replies available to respondents, as evidenced by precisely the degree of uniformity I noted in responses. While I do believe such uniformity tells us much about the uniformity of views about issues around which I asked questions (for instance, "Do you think Van Damme is attractive?" to which a *very* high percentage of male respondents answered either "I don't know because I'm a man," or "No, because I'm a man"), I think it tells us more about the ways in which questionnaires elicit uniform, *a priori* delimited responses.

That said, the questionnaire respondents I cite in this case study were mainly informants who spent a considerable amount of time and effort filling in the

questionnaires as fully as possible, rather than simply putting in a brief answer and moving on. For this reason, rather than because of the nature of the method used, I think the information I received from such informants is well worth including and taking seriously in this particular case study.

In both the questionnaire questions and guideline interview questions (reproduced below), the main aim of the questions in the first section of each set is not so much to gather information (as to how often the informant rents a video, for instance), but to get a sense of how significant films are to the informant and put them at their ease by telling me what types of film they do enjoy. In addition, before each interview started I told each interviewee that my primary aim was to get a sense of what they wanted to talk about and what they felt about martial arts action films, rather than to elicit particular responses to particular questions. I felt that then asking them more general questions about their likes and dislikes, as well as their activities, underlined that aspect of my approach, and would help them feel like participant-informants rather than like subjects being studied.

Overall, I felt that this approach worked fairly well, although I am also pretty certain that it was more effective in the 1999 and 2000 interviews than in the 1996 ones precisely because by then I was much clearer about how I was regarding my informants and what they had to say, and had lost my earlier keenness to focus on particular questions. In particular, of course, my focus on Van Damme was removed as early as later 1996 interviews, for reasons discussed above. I felt this was an important change to make, but as I indicate above, was surprised by the fairly small difference it made to informant responses: Effectively, I believe that many informants had an idea of who and what they wanted to talk or write about, and managed to do that whether I asked them about Van Damme or not. To me this indicates the degree to which film experiencers want to have their voices heard rather than moulded by professional critics, theorists and researchers, and overall I see it as a positive phenomena.

I do not think I ironed out all potential problems with either the questions I asked informants or the ways in which I asked them, and feel that discourse analysis and other approaches might usefully be used to investigate the way I carried out my interviews as well as the way I handled questionnaires. But for now I want to acknowledge that I was and remain aware of the problems involve din such research,

to assert that I did my best to avoid pitfalls, and to set out for my reader's perusal the questions and guideline questions my informants answered for this case study.

Questionnaire:

How often do you go to the movies? How often do you rent videos? What kinds of films do you like the most? Are you proficient in any martial art?

Do you like action films, as a rule? Why or why not? Which ones do you like?

Do you like martial arts films? Why and which ones?

Do you think martial arts is especially violent? What do you think about this?

What kinds of people watch martial arts films, do you think? Explain your response.

Do you think children watch them? What do you think about this?

Do you think most martial arts film stars are genuinely talented at martial arts? What do you think about this? What attitudes towards martial arts are promoted, if any, in martial arts action films?

Which, if any, martial arts film stars do you particularly like?

Which, if any, do you dislike?

Why is this?

How does Van Damme compare to other stars?

Have you seen Van Damme in movies? Anywhere else?

Have you seen Van Damme's films [later "many martial arts action films"] at the cinema or on video? How do you explain this?

If you've not seen any Van Damme films [later "martial arts action films"], why is this?

Do you like the way Van Damme's films ["martial arts action films"] look?

What about the plots?

How is family shown? What about women's roles?

What kinds of values and attitudes do you think Van Damme's films ["martial arts action films"] promote, if any?

Do you know any personal details about Van Damme ["any martial arts film stars"]?

Is there anything you'd like to add?

Interview Guideline Questions (1999):

What kinds of films do you watch?

What do you enjoy about them?

(What, if anything, do you enjoy about action films? martial arts action films?)

(Have you seen many martial arts action films? Do you enjoy them?)

How do you think martial arts are shown in films?

Do you think such representations are accurate?

(How do you think violence is treated in martial arts films? other films?)

Do you think "real life" martial artists are aggressive people?

What kinds of people do you think watch martial arts films and why?

(Do you think children watch them? What do you think about this?)

(How do you think women and men are shown? Non-whites?)

What kinds of people do you think participate in martial arts, and why?

Which martial arts/action film stars do you know anything about? How do you know about them?

Which one/s do you like? dislike?

(Have you heard any gossip? Is it of interest to you?)

Do you think any or all martial arts action film stars are genuinely talented at martial arts? Do you care?

Is there anything you would like to add?

WRITING UP THE CASE STUDY

It is no exaggeration to claim that writing up the information gleaned in a case study such as mine throws up issues the complexity of which places the difficulty of actually conducting and designing such a project in the shade. So much has been written about the impossibility of description without interpretation, of the desirability but impossibility of a truly dialogic or polyphonic text, and so on (see Chapter 3), and of drawing conclusions not deeply and inevitably shaped more by the researcher's own identity and perspective than by the identities and perspectives of the informants s/he cites, that the very thought of establishing a form in which to present the experiences of my research informants has all the appeal of a theoretical minefield. At the same time, my desire to articulate what my informants have to say as much as what I have discovered is strong, as is the realization that such research projects *must* be written

up – since there is nowhere else that film experiencers get a voice, even if the voices I cite are framed by my words, desires and so forth.

So, while keeping such issues largely out of sight yet very much in mind, I outline below the ways in which I wrote up and interpreted my research about martial arts action cinema.

Presenting informant responses

Although I outline below the theoretical categories of experience I extrapolated from case study responses, I chose not to use such *a posteriori* categories to structure my presentation of informant responses in this project. Instead, I present informant responses under question/response area headings, where the quotations and other information in each section corresponds to what informants said or wrote in response to certain questions and/or responses that have a bearing on the area in question. So, initially I identify the perspectives from which informants experience martial arts action cinema, and then move to illustrate why it is that informants watch or don't watch, enjoy or dislike, martial arts action films, using their words. I continue in this vein - using often long but sometimes a number of brief, juxtaposed quotations – illustrating informant responses and experiences of martial arts action cinema, commenting on similarities and differences between, as well as the possible significances of, their words as expressions of experience as well as attitude. I do this primarily to make clear the context in which informant comments are elicited *in response to* my own questions, so as not to give any impression that informant quotations are from film experiencers in a research vacuum, as it were. I also found this form of presentation preferable to others I considered because setting out the information under aspect of experience category headings would involve a great deal of repetition, since individual informant comments can be discussed under more than one category heading in almost every case.

I should also make quite clear that, as my discussions in Chapter 3 emphasize, the fact that most of Chapter 5 is concerned with presenting informant responses does *not* mean that is all it is doing – intentionally or not: In my presentation of informants' experiences and/as words, I am also interpreting and sometimes analyzing what they say or write - as well as *how* they articulate it, more often than not. So, I very deliberately do *not* suggest that Chapter 5 is concerned with simply “presenting the data,” as it were (as Willis claims to do in Part I of *Learning to Labor*, Blumer claims to do for most of *Movies & Conduct*, and Hill claims to do throughout *Shocking*

Entertainment), while Chapter 6 interprets and analyzes that data. On the contrary, I insist that while much of Chapter 5 consists of informants' own words and collaborative input, both Chapters 5 and 6 involve interpretive work and analysis on my part, as the researcher and author of the case study and the wider project in which it is contextualized. At the same time, I *do* hold that Chapter 5 contains far *more* presentation of informant responses than does Chapter 6, and would even go so far as to assert that it also contains less interpretation and analysis than Chapter 6. The type of interpretation at work in Chapter 5, after all, largely consists of the ways in which I choose to title, group together and juxtapose informant responses, although I also at some points make more directly interpretive suggestions. Chapter 6, on the other hand, consists largely of overt extrapolation from as well as reflection on the material collected and presented in the case study.

What my study can and cannot do

Since my study is essentially qualitative, and does not claim to provide a statistically “representative” sample of any particular “audience,” national or socioeconomic group, it is impossible for me to make definite claims about the percentages of martial arts action film watchers who also practice martial arts, or indeed about how many martial artists choose not to watch martial arts action films. The evidence from my informants, though, suggests that there are no clear patterns at work here: this is backed up by my own experiences as a researcher, a film experiencer, and a martial arts practitioner. What is worth noting, though, is that while most martial arts practitioners themselves saw little necessary connection between the practice of martial arts and watching martial arts action films, many non-practitioners – and some practitioners – assumed some such connection.

Aspects of experience

One useful way I developed to distinguish between and think about informant experiences in a coherent manner was to identify several different “aspects of experience” that crop up in responses. Under this general heading that refers to the various facets of experience informants identify and/or display in their responses, I present three main “aspects of experience” through which informant responses and positions might be presented, understood and further interpreted. I name a number of *perspectives* of experience *from* which informants experience the martial arts action cinema; I also name a range of *attitudes* expressed to the experience of martial arts action cinema; and I name ways in which – or rather, *as what* – martial arts action films are experienced. I elaborate on what might be included in – and constitutive of – these

categories in Chapter 6, after setting out in Chapter 5 what informants actually wrote and said to me that enabled me to extrapolate such categories.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

I devote a small section of Chapter 6 to discussing how my research might have been presented were it conceptualized primarily in terms of a project investigating CofPs rather than film experiencers *per se*, and to explain why I think the model might be especially useful in future projects that involve consulting and citing film experiencers about films.

I should emphasize the extent to which aspects of experience can *and do* exist within as well as across CofPs, so as to clarify that membership of a CofP does not shape a person's experience of martial arts action cinema monolithically, even if that membership – the goals, experiences, languages, interactions and so forth that it involves – does shape them in some ways and to varying degrees. So, for instance, two film experiencers who are also both members of Hawkeye Tae Known Do, have been members for the same length of time and have achieved the same rank and levels of attendance might still experience martial arts action films in quite different as well as (or instead of) similar ways; this remains so even if, as often happened, both members cite his/her membership of the club as an important factor in shaping his/her views about and experiences of martial arts action cinema.

A range of approaches

My aim in presenting a range of different ways to research and/or present experiencers of martial arts action cinema is to show that (i) I do not claim to have identified the best or only way to carry out such a project, and (ii) that there are various ways in which the “same” subject can be investigated and the same “data” written up, each of which will likely produce different – or at least different emphases in – conclusions.

CHAPTER 5: INFORMANT EXPERIENCES OF MARTIAL ARTS ACTION CINEMA

In this chapter I present and discuss what informant say and write about martial arts action cinema, indicating where their words are responses to direct questions asked by me, whether they are tangential comments, or whether they are written in letter form. I do not categorize informants' words and ideas in this chapter, but instead set them out under headings that reference areas about which I ask and/or informants speak or write to me. Generally, the headings reflect a question I ask of informants, an issue I raise for them, or – on occasion - an issue they raise without any input from me.

HOW DO INFORMANTS IDENTIFY THEMSELVES & THEIR PERSPECTIVES?

I identify “perspectives of experience” on martial arts action cinema from informants' comments about their relationships with both “martial arts action cinema” and my research project. So, for instance, the fact that some informants approached me *because* they are martial artists, and/or said things such as ‘well, as someone who does karate’ (Riley) lead me to identify one perspective of experience as “a martial arts practitioner.” In a similar way, I use informants' words to pinpoint ways in which they identify themselves and the perspectives from which they watch – or do not watch – martial arts action films.

Some informants identify themselves as action film fans or watchers – saying, for instance, ‘well, I like – y’know, action films a lot, so I see some, like, more martial arts types of films’ (Carl) and ‘I watch mainly action films’ (Anon. #4). Others identify themselves more specifically as martial arts film fans or watchers. Examples that illustrate this self-identified perspective include the following: ‘Ever since I was a kid I liked martial arts films’ (Norpel); ‘I don’t really like other action films’ (Crook); ‘I like martial arts films especially well’ (Goldberg); ‘I like them because I can relate to them’ (Garringen); ‘I love martial arts movies’ (Greg); ‘I like martial arts films very much’ (A. Phillips); and ‘I am a big fan of martial arts films’ (Gardner). Other informants are clear about the relationship between their fandom and their motive to participate in my research project – writing for instance, ‘As being a former fan of Jean-Claude and a

present fan of martial arts movies, I have a lot to say!!' (Kumar), and 'For over 10 years I have been enjoying martial arts movies and I hope my views can be of help to you' (Hall).

Many informants who identify themselves as martial arts action cinema fans clarify this by emphasizing that they are fans of Hong Kong and Chinese martial arts films rather than their US equivalents - or that they enjoy both, but in different ways and/or to different degrees. David Hayward, for instance, writes that 'I enjoy martial arts films from Hong Kong. I also like Van Damme and think he is underestimated as a martial artist;' Chris Gilzean writes that 'I like martial arts films in general, especially those made in Hong Kong as long as they do not have too many people flying around on strings;' and Justin Gardner writes that:

I prefer the martial arts films that come out of Hong Kong for their fighting compared to any film made in America. But the big blockbuster films in America are better in terms of story, acting, and explosions.

Joe Cebula also emphasizes that his main interest is in non-Hollywood martial arts films – saying 'my actual favorite films are like old school kung-fu films from Hong Kong – yeah I have a humungous collection of just like chop socky action flicks' - although he watches US martial arts action films as well. Similarly, Anil Kumar writes that 'I think far eastern movies are still the best in terms of action and martial arts;' John Hall writes that

I have viewed several American actioners and found them all alike with few redeeming features, whereas in contrast, Hong Kong productions are far more original and enjoyable;

and Dade Freeman writes:

Anyway I think Martial Art films are cool, that's not to say all martial art films. For instance my favourites are Shaolin films, they rock like Iron Maiden at Wembley with Aerosmith supporting. However the Power Rangers movie or the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles suck like Spice Girls concert.

Jason Pitter goes further than most of these informants, though, when he suggests that US films are not part of "martial arts action cinema," saying:

I don't treat martial arts films in the same way I treat other action films. Um, if for instance we use an example of a film like say Jean-Claude Van Damme is in, that sort of action film I don't like.

Here, the choice to refer to a Van Damme film as an "action" rather than a "martial arts" film is significant; specifically, it points to how different film experiencers see films differently, and to some extent make their own choices about how to apply and

understand genre labels. This points up the more general problems of defining a film genre, and of defining an area or object of study for film studies – as I mention in Chapter 1.

Another way in which informants identify themselves is as fans of a particular star or stars of the martial arts action cinema. Very often, Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee are mentioned in this context, with informants telling me, for instance: ‘I like – like anything with Jackie Chan in it’ (Crisman); ‘Jackie Chan I think’s the best, I love his stuff’ (Hayes); ‘Jackie Chan I love’ (John); ‘I do like watching Jackie Chan movies’ (Crook); ‘My favourite martial artist actor is Jackie Chan, he is just the ULTIMATE in kung-fu performers’ (A. Phillips); ‘I like Bruce Lee films’ (Andrea); ‘I am a big, *big* fan of Bruce Lee’ (Greg); ‘Bruce Lee is just awesome’ (Bormet); ‘I like, obviously, Bruce Lee’ (Clancy); and ‘Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung, they’re my favourites’ (Pitter). Other stars are also mentioned in this context – for instance: ‘I like Seagal movies because I like him’ (Luke); ‘I like Seagal – he does a lot of damage with not a lot of flashy stuff, and I like that’ (Anon. #5); ‘I especially like Chuck Norris’ (Roberts); ‘In my opinion the real action stars are Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Chow Yun Fat’ (Kausar); ‘I like Van Damme – but Dolph Lundgren is the best’ (McDonald); ‘I think – I like Jean-Claude Van Damme. Although his movies, today, are going steadily downhill’ (Waldbusser); and ‘I collect anything on Van Damme and I am in his American fan club... I am not a martial arts fan, but I became a fan of Jean-Claude after seeing *Universal Soldier*’ (Edwards).

Informants often also identify themselves and/or their perspective on martial arts action cinema by which stars they do *not* like, though. Al Mueller, for instance, writes in response to the question, “Which... actors do you especially like or dislike?”:

I like Jackie Chan and Arnold Schwarzenegger mainly because they are able to look at what they do and poke fun at it (*à la* any movie with Chan in it or *Last Action Hero*). I also liked Speakman in *The Perfect Weapon* and Van Damme in *TimeCop*. The dialogue and character development was imply really well done. I personally don’t appreciate Seagal, Stallone, or Wilson – arrogant protagonists are not my schtick.

In his letter, Hall underscores his identity as a fan of non-US martial arts action cinema by reference to the stars he likes and dislikes, writing:

Stateside martial artists such as Jeff Wincott, Jeff Speakman, Olivier Gruner and Mark Dacascos simply can’t compare with their oriental counterparts, since the likes of Jackie Chan, Yuen Biao, Donnie Yen and the aforementioned Sammo Hung are not only superior performers but also outstanding fight

choreographers.

Other informants also mention those they dislike as well as those they like, whether or not in response to a direct question from me. Some, indeed, seem motivated to participate in my research at least in part to express their views about a particular martial arts film star. Tim Garringen, for instance, vehemently asserts that Van Damme 'sucks,' saying that 'he has poor form, it's fake – he just throws his legs around,' and that 'he gives a bad name to martial arts.' Also, Sally tells me that while 'I like a lot of those films – but Seagal – Steven Seagal I *hate* – I hate his pony tail, and he's just so - lumbering,' while Mark Crisman makes a point of mentioning Chuck Norris, saying:

I guess I do bring up Chuck Norris quite often – because to me he's the personification of the ridiculous. He does like a roundhouse and an axe kick and everything's over.

Another informant outlines which martial arts film stars he *does* like, then reveals a lot about what it is he likes and dislikes about the genre as a whole in his comments about a number of stars he does not like a great deal:

- John: I think Jean-Claude is - just a very talented hack; he's a very flexible, graceful hack. If he weren't a dancer I wouldn't watch him because he's just not interesting ... his martial arts knowledge is minimal. Jeff Speakman is a semi-talented hack also.
- SH: What about Seagal?
- John: Seagal - he's had some aikido training - but the words of a master are gibberish in the mouth of someone who has no understanding - and that's what a lot of that is. And Steven Seagal is just a big goon, basically!
- SH: What about others?
- John: Lorenzo Lamas? Long hair, nice butt. Dolph Lundgren – big guy!..... Don Wilson is a poseur - he was a narrator for one of the UFCs and, er, so clearly demonstrated his ignorance that I lost any respect for him - if I ever had any.
- SH: What about Chuck Norris?
- John: Chuck Norris? A good points fighter - but politically suspect.
- SH: What about Sonny Chiba or..?
- John: He seems like a kind of flail 'em wail 'em style of Japanese movies which I don't like very much.

A proportion of informants identify themselves as people who watch martial arts action films very little – writing, for example, 'I am interested in some martial arts films, but there are quite a lot what I don't like' (Fletcher), or saying 'I don't like them – there's too much fighting and graphic violence' (Cowen); 'like I said – martial arts movies, I don't really watch them' (Ashton); 'the only time I ever really see martial arts films is

when I'm thumbing through the stations and a cool one's on' (Andrea); 'no... but a good Jackie Chan movie once in a while is quite entertaining because they are so cheesy' (Denton); and 'no, I don't watch them much – I think about five percent of them are any good' (Aitchison). Still others say they do not watch martial arts action films at all – explaining, for instance, that 'I tend to prefer films with more substance or humor' (Mahraun); the stars 'are just people I've heard of, not seen' (Pesek); 'actually I've not sat down and watched a whole film ... I see like ten seconds here and there' (Mendoza); 'I don't think I've seen a whole martial arts film – I've seen clips of them and, like, TV shows... but other than that, nothing really' (Muller); 'I've never seen one' (Krystal); or simply 'I don't watch them' (Rachel).

A few informants identify their gender or sexuality as a significant influence on their perspective(s) of experience (for instance, 'as a woman who likes action films' (Anon #2); female informants who say 'martial arts films are for boys' (Shelby) or 'watching them – it's kind of a male thing, y'know' (Anon. #4)). I will discuss later the extent to which informants feel or suggest their perspectives of experience – and experiences more generally – are influenced by their socioeconomic identities; in this chapter, though, as I indicate above, I don't impose an analysis of socioeconomic categories onto informants. This is not because I don't think socioeconomic categories are significant or important – I do; it is rather because I think it is important to present the terms in which informants describe and otherwise present their own identities in a study intent on allowing film experiencers to "speak for themselves." And the fact is that the vast majority of informants identify their perspectives of experience in quite different terms from those often imposed on individual or "groups" of "viewers" – terms that are reflected in the sub-categories I use here. (So, for example, an informant might identify himself as a "martial artist" or "action film fan" but rarely as a "white middle-class male.")

WHO WATCHES MARTIAL ARTS ACTION FILMS?

The majority of informants who participated in my research – whether by interview, letter or questionnaire – are martial arts film watchers. However, as I discuss above, a proportion of them are non-watchers of martial arts films; as such, I cite here seven film experiencers who have never watched a martial arts action film, and three who have only seen a few films from the genre. A further six informants have seen a number of martial arts action films, but do not consider themselves fans or even watchers of the genre - having seen them, for instance, 'only when they were on cable and I was bored – real bored' (Wilkerson).

WHO DO INFORMANTS SAY WATCH MARTIAL ARTS ACTION FILMS?

When I ask “who do you think watches martial arts action films?” informant responses vary widely. But a number of informants feel that practicing martial arts has a central bearing on whether a person watches these films or not. Kerri Denton, for instance, writes that ‘people who know a martial art’ watch martial arts action films, ‘because they are interested and could understand it better – just like I now [as an ROTC member] like to watch war movies because I can understand them now.’ Similarly, other informants identify martial arts film watchers as primarily (or only, in some cases) ‘people who are into performing martial arts themselves’ (Purdue); ‘martial arts practitioners – to pick up new moves and learn from watching’ (Garringen); ‘I suppose people in martial arts’ (Ashton); while another says that the films are watched by ‘I think a lot of people who do martial arts ... the people that I know who like watching them typically have done some martial arts themselves’ (Mendoza); another that ‘the guys that I train with – we all really like martial arts movies’ (John); and another that ‘I like them, and the other guys here tonight – they do too. We watch them together sometimes, y’know’ (Anon. #5).

In response to the question, “Do you think people who do martial arts watch these films a lot?” Pitter says ‘I think a lot of people who do martial arts watch a lot of these films,’ and Ben Riley says ‘Yes – a lot of us do.’ Other informants express the belief that martial arts practitioners make up a considerable proportion of the watchers, but not all of them. For example, one martial arts practitioner suggests that while many martial arts film watchers are ‘people in the martial arts ...it also depends on the star’ (Bormet), and another says that ‘I think the kinds of people that watch martial arts films are the ones interested in martial arts or just like the action’ (Roberts). Other informants suggest gender identity is more - or at least as - significant than whether or not a film experiencer practices martial arts. One informant suggests that ‘more men than girls’ watch them ‘because they can identify more,’ but also that ‘more girls in tae kwon do than in the national average, though’ watch them (Goldberg); another says that ‘I think men – or boys, watch them. And probably even furthermore, people who have taken martial arts. Men and women’ (Andrea); while another says

I think it’s primarily – for the most part it’s people who do watch martial arts, people that whether or not they can do it they wish they *could* do it – and I think the most, like, dominant characteristic of the people that watch martial arts, I think, is just males ... I just can’t see – not to be stereotypical – I just can’t see a group of girls going out and saying ... let’s rent this Steven Seagal movie or whatever – tonight, and let’s have a party. I just can’t see that

(Waldbusser).

When I ask Scott Waldbusser if he thinks this is because of the content or the marketing of the films, or how society views martial arts, he responds that:

I think it has to do – it has to do with all three of those things. I think ... if you're just going to go out and rent a movie, and you just want something that has beating the crap out of somebody or kickin' somebody's ass – that's what I see martial arts movies, a lot of them, as – at least in the past. I dunno. Maybe it's 'cause – I, I think that, just being more aggressive, like males being more aggressive, that's why ... wanting to be that person but then again I see, no matter, male or female, if you're in tae kwon do, being interested in martial arts movies... that's what you do.

Many informants seem undecided as to whether it's primarily men (or boys) who watch martial arts action movies or primarily martial arts practitioners. Such ambivalence is perhaps best typified in Ross McKim's response to the question of who watches martial arts action films:

I think it's mostly men who watch martial arts movies. Probably younger men. People looking for strong – strong role models perhaps... I think people who do martial arts enjoy them, but they – they're not like the sole people who go out and rent these movies.

In response to the same question, another informant says 'I guess – it's hard to stereotype because I know some people – they're hugely into martial arts films, but I know people who would never do it, but they're into the action or whatever about it' (Crisman), while another says

I think it's a lot – well, er – actually it's probably both ways because I know people that are, like, hate it because it's so fake, but then there are some people who will – people who are in martial arts who will go and see movies for the moves and stuff. Some of the things they do are unrealistic, but some aren't (Clark).

Still another martial arts practitioner informant suggests that it is not only or even primarily martial arts practitioners who watch these films, asserting that:

I believe that a large percentage of people watch these films. There are many different reasons why people watch. I feel that most of the people that watch are not in any sort of martial arts and watch it because they have an interest in believing they could do certain moves and techniques. Those who are in martial arts have some type of understanding of what techniques would be practical in real situations (Norpel).

Here, Troy Norpel indicates that people watch martial arts films because they might desire the ability to be able to 'do certain moves and techniques' – whether or not they actually practice a martial art. This echoes part of Waldbusser's response to the same

question, when he says 'I think it's primarily – for the most part it's people that do watch martial arts, people that whether or not they can do it they wish they *could* do it.' Another informant suggests this is an attraction for film experiencers when he claims that in watching martial arts action films '[y]ou can watch somebody else do to somebody what you'd love to be able to do... and I think there's a real broad audience because of that' (John). This is something Andrea Crook implies, too, when she says 'Real-life martial artists aren't as good as that [laughs].'

Another common response is to identify martial arts action cinema watchers as male and usually young too – something hardly surprising given the marketing and socio-cultural status of martial arts films. In addition to the informants already cited as holding that the majority of martial arts action film watchers are male (Andrea, Goldberg, McKim, Waldbusser), many others also identify this as a key characteristic of film experiencers who watch and enjoy such films. Elena Pesek, for instance, says 'I would imagine the audience is more men – more men that I know like them;' Michael Morris asserts confidently that 'I think the action genre is fairly well dominated by 14 to 19 year old males;' Howard Cowen identifies martial arts action film watchers as 'men – young to middle age;' Pitter says 'I think it's popular – it's popular amongst young men;' while Jessica Muller says 'It seems to me it would be guys about my age, maybe teenagers too – or twenties;' and Simona Fischer agrees, saying 'I think it's definitely teenagers – probably mainly males, but some females.' And when I ask informants if they think women watch martial arts films, one replies 'I think some may watch them, I don't know how many – I'd be pretty sure it's a lower percentage than boys' (Shawn); another tells me 'I doubt many girls watch 'em – unless, like, maybe if they think Van Damme or someone is, y'know, hot or whatever' (Anon #?); and when I ask Pitter "D'you think many women watch them, do you know many women who watch them?" he replies 'Funnily enough I do know a few women, but certainly not as many as men who watch them,' but later adds that 'I think there are more women who watch than people realize.' A similar response comes from Darren Aitchison who, when I ask him if he thinks many martial artists watch these films replies:

Yeah, but it's more people who don't – generally like high school, college-aged guys – they just eat 'em up! And, I dunno – like young, adolescent males, I guess,

but who later adds that although he believes the films are

geared to – you know, the non-thinking, aggressive male types, so there's a lot of truth to what the critics say – but there's also a – more women watch these films than they think.

Overall, though, the belief that ‘the audience is primarily male’ (Mueller) is a typical one amongst my informants. It is also a belief that causes some annoyance to female martial arts action film fans - including myself; the Iowa City artist who told me that ‘For me, as a woman liking action films – I mean I’ve been in there looking and I’ve had guys say to me, at the counter – well, drama is over there’ (Anon #2); and Hinna Kausar, a video store manager who writes:

I would also like to point out that being a female, people feel that females shouldn’t be interested in this genre. When I do recommend titles to customers some are quite shocked that I actually know a great deal about a 90% male dominated genre. But if I enjoy watching them, why should I be stopped?

Norma Edwards, an informant who identifies herself primarily as a Van Damme fan (and not as a martial arts or other action film fan), writes that she believes ‘his films appeal to both sexes and most ages,’ supporting this claim by adding that ‘I have asked my family and his films appear popular with most of them.’ Kausar supports this notion that the appeal of martial arts action films starring Van Damme might be wider than others when she writes that ‘Many women find him attractive which I feel has drawn females to watch his films, as they have never been interested in action or violent films before. That’s probably because they haven’t seen a good Hong Kong movie!’

Although the belief that most martial arts action film watchers are male is widespread, many informants felt that they had to explain *why* they believe that to be the case rather than simply assert it. One informant, for instance, says that the reason fewer women than men watch martial arts films ‘may be partly due to the – characters in the films. By and large the heroes in all these films are men,’ adding that ‘they’re geared very much towards the male character being the martial artist and in that sense I think it’s more attractive to young men, probably for that reason’ (Pitter). Another informant says in response to “Who watches martial arts action films?”

Oh, uh – that’s a tough question to answer, I mean anyone who finds them interesting I guess – typically men, typically. Most of the people that watch them are probably not involved in the martial arts. In general they’re probably fairly lazy and sit and watch these movies and – I dunno, drool over them. But yeah, I would say typically male just because they are violent and that’s not a big sell for the female audience (Cebula).

Despite the prevalence of this kind of view, one informant who says ‘I think more guys watch them than girls, for some reason’ makes it clear that he does not see why this is so, adding ‘I don’t know why that is – I’d watch them if I was a girl’ (Barnes). Similarly recognizing the likelihood that most film experiencers who watch martial arts action

films are male, but that this is not necessarily so, Morris says when I ask him “Who watches martial arts films?”, ‘All kinds of people, I hope, but generally, adolescent males.’ When I ask him why he thinks that, he offers two suggestions: ‘Lots of aggression, and the movies fuel or excite that – I think they enjoy or feed off that... but peer pressure might have a lot to do with it.’

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a number of informants share something of the common critical perception that people who watch and enjoy martial arts action films do so because they enjoy violence and/or either can’t or don’t wish to engage in watching anything more demanding. When asked “Who watches martial arts films?” one informant replies: ‘I don’t know why a person would watch these films’ (Gahn); another asserts that they are watched by ‘people who like excitement - especially excitement stemmed from violence’ (Anon. #1); while another says ‘men who like violence’ (Rachel). As implied here by Rachel, above by Morris, and as Cebula does when he says that ‘I would say [watchers are] typically male just because they are violent and that’s not a big sell for the female audience,’ a link is often assumed between male film experiencers and a wish to watch “violence.” Many informants voice their assumption of this link in various ways in what they say or write. For example, Shawn says ‘I think a lot of guys like [martial arts action films] just because of the violence,’ and Christine says ‘guys – they like movies with blood and violence.’ This is something I discuss further when I investigate why it is people watch and enjoy martial arts action films, and who sees them as “violent” or not.

When I asked informants whether they think children watch martial arts action films, and if so what they think about this, most had definite ideas on the issue. Very few informants bring up this issue themselves, though (– although Ben Clancy’s initial response to the question “Who do you think watches martial arts action films?” was ‘A lot of kids, probably – because martial arts are pretty available here now and either they train in it or they want to’). Responses vary considerably from person to person. Overall, informants tend to think children *do* watch the films, although many felt they watched cartoon rather than live-action films, and several express concern about children watching them at all, replying to my question by saying, for instance, ‘I hope not, but yes, I think they do’ (Pesek).

Many informants are quite sure children watch martial arts action films – saying for instance ‘oh yeah – I bet they do’ (Clark); ‘if they find them on TV I bet they do’ (Fischer); ‘yes, yes – I mean kids see all this stuff’ (McKim); ‘yeah, I’m pretty sure they

do – you see them try to do it and stuff’ (Anon #6); and ‘yes, I think more kids watch martial arts films now than they did. Every kid I know loves the Power Rangers’ (Roberts). Others, though, express some ambivalence, saying for example ‘I think it depends on the movie’ (Shawn) and that ‘it’s hard to know – I don’t think children go to the video store and pick one, but if they’re flipping through the channels and one just happens to be on, they certainly might watch it for a little while’ (Andrea). A number of informants say they believe children watch martial arts action films on the basis that ‘I watched them when I was a kid’ (Barnes) or that ‘oh yeah [laughs] – I would much rather – when I was a kid, I’d have killed for a martial arts film collection’ (Crisman). At the same time, a number of informants suggest children now watch martial arts action films aimed *at children* rather than those made with an adult experienter in mind. It is a fairly common perception, for instance, that children watch the Power Rangers and Teenage Mutant Hero/Ninja² Turtles (Ashton, Barnes, Cebula, Goldberg, A. Morley, Norpel, Roberts), but not the adult stars. Informants suggest that while children watch ‘maybe someone like Van Damme, but not someone like Seagal’ (Goldberg); and ‘I mean, you’ve got like the Power Rangers and the – the turtles... they’re aimed at kids’ (Cebula), while one informant replies:

I don’t know about that [if kids watch] – y’know, the Ninja Turtles and that, obviously they’re geared towards kids – but I don’t know. I teach a lot of children and I’ve never heard them talk about Chuck Norris or Van Damme or Seagal. I have heard them talk about the Ninja Turtles and the Power Rangers ... I’ve never heard them talk about one of the adult stars (Ashton).

Along similar lines, Norpel suggests that ‘I feel the martial arts films children watch today very different than when I was a kid. Today most of these films are cartoons with martial arts in them.’ Another informant points out in answer to my question that:

Oh, it depends on what you call martial arts films - y’know, Power Rangers and stuff... when I was in Japan my kids used to come in and be doing move from Power Rangers or Ultraman or stuff... Yeah, so kids watch them a lot – some of them are made for kids, like *The Karate Kid* (John).

Similarly, Waldbusser suggests that:

I think they are more now, and there’s a lot more cartoons I think – like Power Rangers, or whatever there is now, that play to the kids’ interests. But I think – I think the children’s interests in martial arts steadily going up – from when I first joined when I was eight to where it is now...

² The Turtles are referred to as “Ninja” in the US, where they are produced, but were for some years referred to as “Hero” in the UK, where the term was censored because of its associations with extreme violence.

Also, when I ask Clancy, “Who do you think kids watch?” he replies ‘The young kids? Not Bruce Lee so much – they watch Van Damme, the Power Rangers, yeah – but not Chuck Norris much, maybe, and not Bruce Lee.’

Informants’ particular experiences play an obvious role in informing their responses to this particular question, whether it’s a reference to their own experience of watching films as children, or to what they hear young children talk about (Muller says ‘I’ve baby-sat kids before who talk about them and try to imitate kicks and stuff;’ a high school student says ‘I’ve babysat little kids that try to do like moves from those films’ (Shelby); and Vincent Luke says ‘I know kids who try to mimic it – they’ll try to mimic it, so there’s something appealing’). Many informants, too, suggest that children watch them largely because ‘violence seems to impress younger children quite a bit – take my nephews for example’ (Morris); this is a discussion central to many critical and theoretical discourses about film, and plays a significant role in informants’ comments and attitudes about “violence” in martial arts action cinema, discussed below.

Many informants assert there is a wide – and sometimes surprising – range of film experiencers who watch martial arts action films. One UK video store clerk says that ‘all types of people buy – I mean they buy them so I guess they watch them’ (A. Morley), and his colleague tells me that ‘we have this little old lady that comes in and buys them’ (Hayes). In contrast, the US video store clerks stuck closer to the idea that ‘I think men like these films more than girls’ (Stokes; also cf. Morris). However, Morris says that ‘some women’ do indeed rent them, suggesting that stars like Van Damme are ‘probably attractive to more superficial left-brain women... or maybe like sorority girls and superficial, body-conscious women,’ but also that because ‘[t]here’s a lot of violence towards women in our society... it might be appealing to some women – like in *Cosmo* it said women want to date bigger men because they feel protected’ (Morris). The US video store clerks also suggest that Van Damme in particular has a large number of gay male fans: One, for instance, says ‘a lot of gay men watch Van Damme films’ (Anon #6) and when I ask Morris if he is surprised to hear this, he says ‘No, not at all.’ Few informants brought up the issue of gay men watching martial arts action films, but when I ask them if they’d be surprised if Van Damme has a gay male following, no-one seems particularly surprised: ‘I think, um, there isn’t much of a gay audience for a lot of martial arts movies, and um... and I’ve a feeling that the female audience is very small for other martial arts stars’ (John) offers one informant; another says ‘I didn’t know that – that’s interesting, actually. Anyone who’ll go out and watch his movies – he’s got to be happy with that’ (Barnes); while another says ‘it wouldn’t

surprise me if gays watch Van Damme – but I don't know about other action films – I dunno, I guess they might they'd like the guy's bodies' (Riley).

Two questionnaire respondents also feel that a fairly broad range of film experiencers watch martial arts action films. One writes that

I think the audience is primarily male; however, I think that it would generally tend to be younger people (under 35) and corporate types who would most enjoy such films. Younger people are surrounded by violence on a day-to-day scale. But in martial arts films, that violence is directed against the bad guy, something that doesn't happen in real life all the time. So, it gives a kind of order to their lives. I think business folks go in for it because it is the type of environment that they are most accustomed to – they live it (Mueller),

while the other offers the observation that:

The people I see in the theater tend to be all ages, but a greater percentage of Asians and young people (college-age) than the general population. A lot of the people in Asian Media Access, the local group that brings Hong Kong films here, are older than me, though – maybe even my parents' generation (Tielking).

The differences here are not only in the types of film experiencer suggested, of course, but also between the bases on which each informant makes his response: While the first appears to be assessing potential watcher identities on the basis of what is shown in the films (their content), the second informant is happier when he can use his own lived experiences to comment on the identities of martial arts action film watchers. In a later discussion, Eric Tielking offers further suggestions about who watches martial arts action cinema, but again lets his answer be guided largely by experiences he has had rather than by more text-oriented reasons, telling me that 'The people I've talked to who take martial arts, watch the films in order to enjoy the choreography and the cool stunts the actors perform.' In addition, when he then gives possible reasons for martial arts practitioners watching the films, and their possible attitudes to them, he ends by pointing out that 'I'm just speculating here' (Tielking), but returns to referencing his own experiences when he comments on Van Damme's films, saying that:

A young, intelligent woman I knew at college saw one once, and then ridiculed it to the rest of the karate club. I don't know what that means. I would assume the market for these films was mainly young and mainly male.

Here, it is not clear how Tielking gets from his friend's report of the film she watched to the assumption that they are generally watched by young, male film experiencers. He

seems rather to be using the example of one woman acquaintance's response to indicate that women ("even" martial arts practitioners) do not enjoy such films.

A few informants insist that martial arts action films are not watched only by younger people. One kickboxer, for instance, suggests that 'all sorts of people watch these – my dad watches fight films, like with Chuck Norris and Seagal and stuff' (Carl); while Edwards claims that Van Damme's films appeal 'to both sexes and most ages,' and Kirsty McDonald writes that 'I think lots of people, all different ages, watch his [Van Damme's] movies. My dad thinks he's excellent, and he's 48 years old.' Matt Burgess also provides an example to support his beliefs, writing that:

I believe Van Damme has a wide group of fans, who enjoy his movies and wish to take up martial arts. I know this as I watched *The Quest* at a cinema one Wednesday afternoon and behind me was a frail old lady, who seemed to enjoy it more than myself.

Another informant refers primarily and self-consciously to his own experiences when answering my question about who watches martial arts films:

SH: And what kind of people do you think, or do you know who watch martial arts films or even groups of people?

JP: Well, I think it is – it's *largely* groups, it's not just the groups, but I think it is largely groups. And, I think it's popular – I know it's popular amongst young men. I was gonna say in a general sense. I can speak as far as – I know it's popular amongst different racial groups, and I think there is an element of cultural ... I know it's popular amongst the Asians, in the Indian and Pakistani community. I know it's popular amongst the Chinese – but perhaps not as much as people might think...

SH: Yeah, right – they don't all watch martial arts avidly!

JP: Yeah, definitely. It's not as much as people think. And to tell you the truth, it *may* be more popular in the Asian and Black communities than it is in the young Chinese community.

SH: Right.

JP: And – so far as, and I'm speaking from experience of me going, I didn't find – many people who, from er, a typical white working-class background are interested in martial arts films. That may be a question of access – you know, not knowing people who knew about them, because... at the end of the day there are not many areas where you go to your local cinema and can watch a martial arts film.

SH: Yeah, that makes sense.

JP: I mean you first see these when a friend, or somebody you know is saying, well have a look at this movie I've got, all right? And as I said, that was *my* entry into it. So, people who haven't come from a mixed community, I've found, haven't had an interest. And you know, I also tend to find people who haven't had an interest at a younger age, I find that they find it difficult to find them interesting – later on

in life (Pitter).

Apart from Pitter, only four other informants even refer to racial identity as being a factor in who watches martial arts action films. One tells me that:

Anon: I think a lot of African American men – a *lot* of African American men watch these films, and I guess that's because, it's because, y'know, they are so often expected to do a lot with their physique, with their *bodies*, in our culture.

SH: What do you mean by "do," exactly? What are they expected to *do* with their bodies?

Anon: I just mean, you know, African American men are often thought of as being very physical – a lot of them *are* very physical, and so – I guess the films appeal to them because in a way they can identify, with a white hero – even if that hero is white, he is acting like an African American man might, he is poor and he uses, he improves himself through the way he uses his body (Anon #2).

Also, Waldbusser says that one of the reasons he watches a number of martial arts action films is because his housemates are Chinese, which has opened up his experience to non-US as well as Hollywood films. And two of the kickboxing tournament participants I spoke with mention race in the context of discussing who watches martial arts action cinema:

Mike: A lot – I guess I don't see a whole lot of white guys watching these movies, not watching the ones I watch, anyways

Carl: Yeah, maybe, maybe – but, they ain't often in our part of town, y'know, and it's not like we rent movies with white guys – not unless they train with us, like Mike...

Mike: ... I don't see them at the theater if there's a Jackie Chan on – the guys I grew up with, I just don't very much, that's all.

These comments are the only ones made by informants about the significance of race to watching films, although a number of others might have voiced opinions on the issue had I asked a direct question. The particularly limited number and scope of comments makes it hard to draw any general conclusions, but what extrapolations might be made are interesting. The idea that Black men might find the films attractive because they can identify with a white hero *because* he is working class, and (as such) using his body to "get ahead," is evident in the comments made by the Black female artist I cite. At the same time, Pitter, Mike and Carl raise the issue of *access* to the films as significant – suggesting that perhaps fewer white people live in areas where martial arts action films play, or fewer white people are involved with ethnic groups who watch such films in the first place. Certainly I get a sense from these informants that racial identity plays some role in shaping people's film experiences and watching

practices; in particular, Pitter's suggestion that Indian and Pakistani youths are often keen martial arts film watchers in the UK is supported not so much by the Asian informants (none of whom mention the issue of race/ethnicity), but by comments made to me by Asian friends and acquaintances who confirm that martial arts action films are watched by many young British Asian males. This begs the question, though, of why more Asians – or indeed Black people – did not participate as informants in my research; this points to a problem with research projects that do not target particular “audience groups,” and might thus under-represent certain socioeconomic groups’ experiences. This in turn suggests that film experiencers work can benefit not only from *listening* to what informants say, but also from *acting* on that information – perhaps by eliciting responses from individuals in under-represented socioeconomic “categories.” This would provide more information regarding how far one’s socioeconomic identity impacts on film experiences, and could indicate whether individual informant’s views about the impact and significance of identity categories (such as race) are borne out by the responses of informants in the “categories” identified by them.

Assumptions about film experiencers

While the *degree* of care not to generalize and make assumptions about martial arts film watchers, their identities, motives and pleasures is more evident in some informants’ comments than in others, most informants do seem far less willing than most film theorists and critics to generalize about martial arts action film watchers in negative ways. I suggest that that such an attitude – often somewhat ambivalent - comes from informants’ lack of willingness to *stereotype* film experiencers. This is made explicit in Tielking’s, Pitter’s Crisman’s, Clark’s and Cebula’s responses, for instance, and is evident in other informants’ comments; it is also an attitude that many film theorists and critics would do well to adopt.

WHY DO FILM EXPERIENCERS WATCH & ENJOY MARTIAL ARTS ACTION FILMS?

Informants suggested a number of ways in and reasons for which film experiencers watch and/or enjoy martial arts action cinema. They do this both directly – by stating or guessing reasons why they and/or other film experiencers enjoy martial arts films – and indirectly, in the ways they talk about the cinema and the areas they choose to talk about the most. In this section, then, I want to focus on informant responses to the questions “Do you like martial arts action films?” and “Why do people watch martial

arts action films, do you think?” I also bring in responses that address the issue of why people watch and/or enjoy martial arts action films in the context of other questions or areas of discussion.

MARTIAL ARTS ACTION CINEMA AS ENTERTAINMENT

Many informants base their like or dislike of martial arts action cinema on whether or not they find it “entertaining.” Responses to my question of “Why do you like martial arts films?” include: ‘it’s entertainment – just some fun’ (Hayes); ‘they’re entertaining, y’know, they’re just fun’ (Anon #5); ‘I like to be entertained – and they do that for me’ (Riley); and ‘to me watching these movies is about escapism – y’know, it’s just a release. I’m big on entertainment’ (Pitter). Interestingly, many of those who dislike or are disinterested in martial arts action cinema cite its “violence” as a reason for their feelings of distaste and others’ enjoyment of the films, while virtually none of those who like the films cite “violence” as something they enjoy – or even identify – in experiencing and enjoying martial arts films.

‘Suspense’ and ‘pace’

Some informants clearly want (and expect) a martial arts or other action film to have particular elements in addition to action to keep it “interesting.” For instance, in response to the question, “Do you like action films?” several informants cite ‘suspense’ as an important element of entertainment for them: Norpel, for example, writes ‘Yes, I enjoy films with action. I especially enjoy suspense. It keeps the movie interesting, even when it is a bad movie;’ Krystal Roberts writes ‘Yes, I find action films very interesting. They are usually suspenseful and keep you awake!’ and another informant says ‘Often times I like the suspense in martial arts movies’ (Anon #3). These comments suggest that some film experiencers feel that martial arts action films run the risk of becoming boring if they don’t keep up some form of suspense – a feeling echoed by informants who identify “pace” as an important element of martial arts action cinema.

As Barker and Brooks found when researching experiencer responses to *Judge Dredd*, I found that a large number of informants enjoyed the fast *pace* of martial arts and/or action films they watch. For instance, Mueller says that he

like[s] them because they are fast-paced. When the mind lingers, it analyzes. I do enough analyzing in my day-to-day studies, and martial arts movies tend to be the fastest of all the genres. So, there’s no time to linger,

while Randy Clark enjoys action films because

just uh – there's like no dull moments. Sometimes movies can drag on, and I don't like that – so typically action movies are pretty much non-stop – especially now like in a lot of the action adventure movies they're putting in a lot of comedy too ... so that's why I like them.

Pointing to a similar concern with pace, another informant writes that he enjoys martial arts action films because 'I have a short attention span and action movies are easier to keep up with' (Garringen). In a related but less positive comment, Aitchison says experiencers enjoy martial arts films

because people have such a short attention span nowadays – it's like, it's the same effect as playing a video game. They don't have to think, y'know – they're sitting there being a vegetable, and it's just like watching a video game, pretty much.

The “excitement” of martial arts action cinema

One of the recurrent ways in which informants identify what they enjoy – and find “entertaining” – about martial arts and/or other action films is to refer to the “excitement” such films provide for their experiencers. Some feel that action/adventure and martial arts films ‘generally tend to give some excitement to an otherwise dull (in my case because of the rigors of PhD work) month’ (Mueller), while others respond to the question, “Why do you enjoy action films?” saying simply ‘the excitement’ (Purdue); that ‘I find them fun – exciting to watch’ (Anon #4); and that they are ‘exciting to watch’ (even if ‘I never really thought of *why* I like them’) (Ashton). Crisman emphasizes how the excitement of martial arts films comes from the very fact that ‘obviously it's not really what goes on – but any movie's like condensed’ so they are ‘more appealing to watch – like more exciting, like watching an NBA game compared to actually playing a game. The movies are just so amazing to watch.’

Echoing this sense that martial arts action films are ‘amazing to watch,’ and provide an ‘escape’ as well, Gilzean writes that martial arts action films are so entertaining because they

are bigger than life, they're comic books, put your brain in neutral, forget your worries and cares for a couple of hours. Nobody could dodge the bullets flying, or take the bashing that action stars do, but who cares, the biggest majority of people who watch these films are sane, hard-working people who just want to see a bit of action.

Another informant explains his love of martial arts films by saying simply ‘It's hormonal!’ (Goldberg), while others suggest the importance of such responses to the films by writing that ‘[w]hen I was younger, and sometimes today, after I watch an action film I like, I feel excited and I want to go work-out’ (Norpel), and ‘I like ‘em

because – well I feel real pumped up, y'know, they make me wanna go for a run or something, y'know – sometimes, the good ones' (Anon #4). Another informant suggests that martial arts action films 'fuel or excite' the 'aggression' felt by their watchers, saying that film experiencers 'enjoy or feed on that' (Morris). Other informants try to explain how key "excitement" is and what might explain what they mean by it. For instance, Norpel writes that 'Ever since I was a kid, I liked martial arts films. Many young kids are fascinated by these films. I enjoy the excitement and action,' and Aaron Bormet explains that

seeing individuals perform their act is exciting to me. To be in a movie the star and - or the villain are most likely good at what they do. Well choreographed fight scenes can be quite enjoyable. One that sticks out is between Bruce Lee and Chuck Norris in *Return of the Dragon*. I liked that fight so much I bought the video.

Even an informant who doesn't like martial arts action films as a rule indicate that he *does* enjoy 'the action and special effects' - if only 'moderately' (Cowen).

What *is* "exciting"?

One informant indicates that while fight sequences such as the one he singles out in *Return of the Dragon* (above) are key to the "excitement" of martial arts films that makes them "enjoyable," well choreographed fight scenes are not all that matter. He writes of action films:

I do enjoy watching them, but most are done poorly. Bad plots and uninteresting characters are all too common. Big explosions don't mean big excitement for me. Story is important (Bormet).

Here it is apparent that "excitement" can mean quite different things – and quite a range of things – for different people. Indeed, the notion that action in itself is not *enough* to make a martial arts action film exciting, worth watching at all – that is, entertaining - is prevalent amongst informants. Vanessa Phillips, for instance, writes that she likes martial arts films 'only if the story is any good,' and Tielking responds to the question, "Do you like action films?" in the following way:

Yes, if there's more than just the action. (There should be an interesting setting, or character interaction, or be about something I happen to be interested in.)

Other informants share this view, evidenced in general comments as well as those about particular films they pick out *because* they like their plots as well as their action. Several informants refer to Van Damme's film, *TimeCop*, in this context, saying for example 'I saw *TimeCop* – I liked that one, I like its plot – it's a little more entertaining than others to say the least' (Shawn); and 'I like to think about the possibilities of time

travel and the way movies like *TimeCop* seem to make it seem possible – so I liked that one’ (Morris); while another (whose favorite Van Damme film is *TimeCop*) suggests Van Damme’s films generally offer ‘a little more plot development’ than many, ‘and he really mixes them up, too’ (Barnes). Even an informant who generally dislikes martial arts action films allows that he likes *TimeCop* because it ‘attempted to use some interesting concepts of relativity’ (Gahn). However, other informants see similar films as precisely *not* providing enough other than action: One informant who enjoys Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee films, for instance, says ‘but I mean I don’t really care for the Steven Segal, or like Jean-Claude sorta – I mean, obviously they have no story’ (Crisman), and another – who likes a whole range of martial arts action films – does comment that he prefers Van Damme’s earlier films precisely because ‘they actually had a plot! Compared to the ones now, they’re just so ridiculous and sorta stupid – and, it almost hurts to watch it, you know’ (Waldbusser).

On the other hand, several informants made it clear that one of the aspects of martial arts action cinema they enjoy so much is the *lack* of plot – or at least the lack of its importance to their experience. One informant, for instance, says

I do like some aspects of the films – I do like to – erm, usually the plot’s not very good, and the acting’s not very good – but I do like to see some things that kind of knock my socks off. People that are really good – I like to watch them (Crook),

another says ‘I *like* not to have to think about what’s – where the story’s going’ (Mike), while another informant says that he enjoys martial arts films

because they don’t try to get a message across so much - they just try to entertain, they try to get you to forget about who you are for two hours or an hour and a half – y’know, they take you on a thrill ride... it gives you like - an escape (Cebula).

Cebula enjoys this aspect most even though he is well aware that especially US martial arts action films *do* have plots – something evident when he says that:

They usually try to give a reason, a motive, I would say, yes. I mean the good guy doesn’t just grab a gun and kill somebody – I mean, the bad guy has to provoke him. I mean that’s a Hollywood convention from way back – there’s even some films where it goes on and on – I mean the bad guy keeps doing things, the good guy keeps putting it off until right at the last minute the good guy just stands up for himself – he becomes a champion of freedom and justice... and of course he has to win (Cebula).

Other informants agree that while plot is not centrally important to their enjoyment, it is not entirely absent or insignificant. As one says, ‘I mean, you don’t go because of the

story, do you? As long as it's not full of holes, y'know? It's ok – it's the set pieces that make people go' (Hayes). Another comments:

yeah, the stories are interesting – but they're, erm, a lot of times they're jokeable, at least the ones I've seen. I mean the story's all about – er, the story's contrived around the action - you have, you pretty much set up what you want done. This guy fights that guy and the story is – made to fit that set up, so it always seems secondary to me (McKim).

Because of this, he says in response to my question, “So why do people go to see them?”, ‘it's mainly the action – the storylines are kind of pathetic,’ but also that

sometimes, though, you get a pretty good story, and the – the action, punctuates the story. That's what the best films do... but for a lot of movies, it's an understanding that – that the plot is not important (McKim).

Many *non*-watchers of martial arts and/or other action films, however, frequently cite the lack of plot as a key reason they choose not to watch such films, however.

Comments that suggest this are as follows: ‘I tend to prefer films with more substance or humor’ (Mahraun); ‘I find the fight scenes boring’ (Anon. #1); and

once in a while they are ok. I don't always like them because they seem like they all have a similar plot, and often times I like movies with specific actors in them – I'm not proficient with action actors (Denton).

Other informant comments help to elucidate what it is that is “missing” from martial arts and other action films for many people; one writes that:

Generally, I don't like action or martial arts films. Most of them are without good plot and have no purpose. However, whenever I go to the movies and see one (expecting another flop) I usually find it entertaining. I feel that this is because most of the new big-budget action films have better plots than those of the past. The writers of these films now seem to be able to squeeze a plot in between explosions and “ass beatings” (Gahn),

while another says:

The reason I guess I don't like action movies is because I really enjoy the interactions between people that mean something – and rolling off the bottom of a bus – it was cute, but it wasn't very interesting (Fischer).

Such comments suggest that film experiencers who do not watch action films want to experience *more* than action when they watch a film. They want a ‘good plot,’ a ‘purpose’ and to see ‘interactions between people’ that they experience as lacking in martial arts and other action films – as do informants who feel that there's ‘not any real meaningful content’ in martial arts action films (Purdue). Interestingly, though, while

Travis Gahn accuses martial arts and action films more generally of lacking anything much more than ‘explosions and “ass beatings,”’ he also admits that when he *does* go to see action films they usually *do* have more to them. This is important to keep in mind when considering the differences between the perceptions of martial arts action films reported by watchers and non-watchers in this study.

What informants enjoy (and don’t enjoy) about the ‘plots’

As a rule I didn’t ask specific questions about the narrative of martial arts action films, but a lot of informants offered comments and opinions about this “plots” (or lack of them) of martial arts action cinema, often in the context of discussing how “realistic” the films are, or how and why they are (seen as) “violent” or not. As is already apparent, a number of informants feel that martial arts action cinema is not enjoyable because of the perceived lack of “plot,” while others enjoy precisely that aspect of it – citing other elements as what they find essential to enjoying the films. In this section I cite what informants say about plots, then, showing how they perceive them, their status and their significance as part of the experience of martial arts action cinema.

Without exception, watchers and non-watchers identify the plots of martial arts action films as formulaic, with watchers describing or outlining the formulae they expect to experience in the following ways:

In a lot of them it’s about revenge. If a person is forced into fighting – they don’t want to, but you they have to – you always want to put the star in the best light, so they have to have some way that they’re gonna go out and kill everyone in sight, or rather beat up everyone - the evil person. And either the martial artist is a police person, which is not usual, or they’ve done something – their father has been killed and they have to go, y’know, deal with that problem. I think it’s more of, um – that they wanted to live their own lives and then they, they’ve been pulled out of their chosen lifestyle – that’s the way I see it (McKim).

In the martial arts movies somebody kills someone else’s brother, and somebody else – you know, his brother has to avenge that death, that kind of thing – or, y’know, *Mortal Kombat* or that kind of thing. It’s always like – *Die Hard*, you know – someone’s holding someone hostage, just an excuse (Crook).

the films are almost always about, a family member getting killed off (Kumar).

It’s kind of like in the 80s when – have you ever seen “The A-Team?”... Every show, from show to show, it’d always be the same plot. Some bad guy’s oppressing some town or some family, they happen to come along and liberate his family, and then they move on to the next thing. And that’s kind of how some of those shows

seemed to start out (Shawn).

... like the more realistic ones are, like, more likely to show – I mean most of Bruce Lee’s films seem to start with his family being killed, or him being wronged before he can fight – versus like, well I suppose something happens to piss Seagal or Van Damme off, but it’s more like the Incredible Hulk! (Crisman).

The awareness of revenge as a plot device (and as a motivation for “violence”) is widespread amongst informants, one simply saying ‘they do what they have to do, basically’ (Hayes); another that ‘well, the plot – the story usually tells you why the, like, the hero’s aggressive – there’s a reason for it, you know. It’s not senseless or whatever – not in lots of movies’ (Anon #5); and another that ‘they have to have revenge, or there - without it there’s no reason for the good guy to kick ass’ (Greg).

When I ask one informant if he thinks the plot lines in Van Damme’s martial arts action cinema are all similar, he responds:

Yes, I think they are. I think because it’s always about Jean-Claude, always – and his particular ways of acting and looking at the camera, and I guess cutting together his movements. But I think he popularized it, he’s popularized martial arts to a certain degree because he’s not – so intense that people get scared watching him (John).

Similarly, Gilzean acknowledges that the plots of Van Damme’s films are often similar because ‘Family in Jean-Claude’s films is usually strong [and] plays a prominent part in many of the story lines.’ However, while illustrating how this theme is often present – writing, for instance, that Van Damme’s characters can be seen in *Bloodsport* ‘revenging his brother’s death;’ in *Double Impact* ‘revenging his mother and father’s death;’ in *TimeCop* ‘saving his family from death by going back in time;’ and in *Sudden Death* ‘saving his son and daughter from terrorists’ - this informant also suggests there is a degree of variety despite the similarities. Other informants also suggest that while formulaic, martial arts film plots *do* vary. J.R. Barnes, for instance, says of *Nowhere to Run*: ‘I liked it – there wasn’t as much fighting, it was all right. That one had a lot more plot,’ and then says of other Van Damme films:

You could pick a different one out of each. Like in *Bloodsport* he was just out to win a tournament, in *Nowhere to Run* he was just – well, there were about three different things he was trying to do. On the run from the law, saving a family, and beating people up too – so, it depends on the film, really.

Another informant who has also watched a lot of martial arts as well as other action films says:

there’s so much more to these movies than people think, you know

- like we talked about *Cyborg* and all the imagery - the Christ stuff and - and, well, stuff like that. The stories in them are often interesting, bit only if – if you *think* about them. That doesn't mean you have to take them seriously – I don't. Because superficially, I guess, they're not interesting at all! They *seem* kind of dull and – well, not very deep, unless, you know, unless you're willing to put some effort in (Anon #2).

Morris is rather more ambivalent about the plots of martial arts films; he expresses his initial thoughts about the plots of Van Damme's martial arts action films, but modifies them as he thinks the issue through out loud in interview, as evidenced by this segment of the interview:

- SH: Do you like them [Van Damme's martial arts films]?
MM: Er, no – they seem the same, somehow – well, I guess I've enjoyed some, they're not entirely stupid, so I can't say I *dislike* them. They're just not mind-blowing and the action sequences aren't even the best I've ever seen.
SH: Why did you like *TimeCop*?
MM: I like to think about the possibilities of time travel and the way movies seem to make it possible.
SH: Is the basic plot still the same?
MM: I guess the basic plot isn't all the same, but the basic elements are all the same. He meets a woman in an adventure or is trying to save a woman – even in *TimeCop*. But I was lying about them all being the same. In a way *all* movies are the same.
SH: Are the characters always the same?
MM: Similar – He does always seem to be trying to beat someone who's cheated him somehow, or who has cheated someone (Morris).

After this, Morris goes on to suggest that Van Damme is 'somewhat in the middle, I guess' of the positions of martial arts film heroes vis-à-vis the necessity for a motive to fight: He points out that Van Damme is, 'maybe in a way... he's trying to promote that there are some things worth fighting for – that if you're really pushed the limit then it's okay to fight,' situating him in relation to Bruce Lee who he says

would only fight when he was pressed to fight, and, say, Sonny Chiba would start all the fights he was in, pretty much. And I'd say Van Damme is somewhere in the middle, where most of the – part of the time he seems to be fighting when pushed, but there are instances where he's the attacker, as well. But the relationship in *TimeCop* – he seemed noble. He was trying to save his wife and trying to do his job as the Time Cop. I suppose he stands up for his family, and his unborn baby (Morris).

Others insist that in effect the plots of martial arts films are unimportant. As one informant puts it: 'It is what it is – the story's incidental, you just wait for the next fight scene' (Luke), and another says 'the stories are sometimes interesting, but they're not always – they're not what I watch for, y'know' (Riley). Still others offer pragmatic

reasons for the lack of plot in such films – for instance when Crisman suggests that ‘in Hollywood, they don’t need to spend a lot of time developing a story, because they can make just as much money just by putting in some special effects.’ The same informant also suggests that while the plots are distinctly uninteresting, he still enjoys some aspects of the films, saying:

Some of them are technically pretty cool to watch. I mean with Van Damme, like there’s about two interesting minutes every ten minutes so it’s still worth watching cause he’s whipping somebody’s butt. But you know, as far as – I mean it’s two different things. I mean if you turn on just to see some fighting or if you want to watch the whole movie (Crisman).

Some informants tell me that the formulaic nature of martial arts film plots makes them, as film experiencers, ‘more discriminating’ (Luke) about watching martial arts films than other genres. Luke, for instance, says ‘I’m more particular about them than others – because too many of them get clichéd and are just watered down versions of what someone else has done, y’know. So I’ll go watch ‘em – but only if they’re good,’ while another informant says

I like the ones – movies with good stories as well as martial arts, and that aren’t, like, too violent. I watch them. But not the ones that are all, like, men beating on each other with no – no purpose or story that makes sense (Jen).

A prevalent attitude amongst informants is that they think more highly of films whose plot is based on a “true” story. This is something I discuss further below in the context of “realism.” Another way in which informants think the plots of martial arts action films are worth considering is when answering my question, “What attitudes toward martial arts do you think are promoted in and by martial arts films?” In responses to this question, many informants refer to the plots when trying to justify the “violence” represented in martial arts films, arguing for instance that:

well, the attitudes – they’re okay, they are only, I guess, *violent* when they, like, have to be – when there’s no choice. It’s unusual for a movie to have some bloke beat the crap out of some other bloke unless that - he is, you know, really bad – evil, and has killed his brother or something... (Sally).

One informant’s responses, though, are particularly suggestive of the way in which martial arts film watchers might often be said to regard the importance of the “plot:” Early in his interview, Pitter says he likes action films ‘where there is a decent plot or something to keep me engaged. I enjoy that. I don’t enjoy seeing explosions for the sake of it... it needs originality.’ Later, though, when I reference these comments and ask him “so how much does plot matter to you?” his response is rather more complex:

- JP: Um, well, I think it works in inverse proportion to the amount and quality of the action.
- SH: Uh-huh.
- JP: As I said, if there's something on the screen which is a great spectacle, and the effects are brilliant, or it's just very funny - I think that can, that can outweigh the fact that something might have a weak plot, all right? I mean the main thing is how much you enjoy the film, and all those factors come into it - I mean they're all variables that control it as a whole, whether or not you enjoy ... I don't look at enjoyment as a separate entity, I think all those things go into making the film enjoyable or not. If the plot's very weak, you'd better make up for it in other ways.
- SH: Uh-huh.
- JP: You know, I've seen some films where the plot's just *awful*, but I'll watch it again and again, just to - for certain parts of the film, or the action sequences, are great.

This response underscores the importance of differences between individual films informants have seen when they talk or write about the importance of "plot," and also points to the fact that different informants might have different criteria for deciding whether a film can "make up for" its "weak" plot in other ways. It is not insignificant that these comments come from an informant who does not think of US martial arts action films as part of the martial arts film genre (see above). He, along with some other informants, identifies many elements that have nothing to do with "plot" as the most enjoyable and entertaining of the genre, and identifies these elements as best in Hong Kong and Chinese rather than Western martial arts action cinema.

The attractions of the "Jade Screen"

Many informants who identify themselves as watchers of primarily non-US martial arts action cinema emphasize the attraction of spectacle - especially spectacular fight choreography - in their comments. Almost without exception, too, these informants identify Chinese and Hong Kong martial arts films as more effective and enjoyable than their US counterparts in this context. Hall, for instance, writes that:

The vast majority of American "fists'n'feet" releases are mostly uninspiring affairs with bland storylines, mediocre acting and derivative action stolen straight from any amount of Jade screen blockbusters. What separates the standard of fight choreography, is that Western filmmakers have a tendency to overdo the editing during an action scene. For instance, one shot may consist of the antagonist throwing a punch, followed by another shot of the same blow entering the frame and being blocked by the protagonist [sic]. In other words, what should be realistically captured in one take loses impact due to overenthusiastic editing, resulting in one shot too many. A textbook example of this technique is the final reel of Steven Seagal's *The Glimmer Man* (1996).

A similar dissatisfaction with Western martial arts action cinema is evident in Kumar's comparison of Van Damme with Jackie Chan:

I think martial arts films as a whole are generally on the decline, especially Van Damme's. In the early nineties I remember being a young, gullible pre-teen who was fascinated by his sculpted physique and graceful movies, but as the years went on his films weren't really evolving, they were basically revenge sequels *per se*, with similar styles of fighting, and being a huge film fan my own tastes were diversifying and becoming more critical. Although there are other stars whose movies follow the same format e.g. Jackie Chan, the most fundamental difference is 1) he can actually act 2) the sheer energy, inventiveness and creativity that he puts into his fights and stunts are unparalleled. No one Jackie movie is the same in terms of fights, always unique always evolving, each fight usually more intricate and more skilful than the last. Van Damme's were too repetitive and tedious, after a while the jump spin kick he so effortlessly performs loses its value. Incidentally Hong Kong martial arts movies employ this move as *part of* the fights not the final finishing move.

Other informants refer to what they identify as the superior editing and choreographic techniques of non-US martial arts action cinema, too. One in particular makes clear the importance of such aspects of the experience when he writes that:

the action in [Van Damme's] three most recent films has improved one hundred fold, because Van Damme is being directed by the best action directors in the world, who concentrate on the fight scene itself rather than on looking good in front of the camera (Doyle).

This comment echoes the comments of film critics (and some theorists) who write about directors such as John Woo in a serious, often admiring manner, but often dismiss or deride Hollywood martial arts action stars.

Martial arts in mainstream "actioners"

A number of informants who identify as martial arts action film fans make a point of mentioning ways in which martial arts are used and represented in more "mainstream" Hollywood action films, especially in the 1990s. One informant's response to the question, "How do you think martial arts are represented in different types of films?" is as follows:

JP: I think – more and more martial arts in films is becoming – it's becoming part of the background where it's almost not - not mentioned as being something special – I mean if you take recent films, in something like *The X-Men*, a lot of the characters in that, who – who are doing martial arts but it wasn't something that is particularly highlighted or mentioned.

SH: Right.

- JP: So these – it's there and I suppose it's represented [knock on interviewee's door leading to a short break]
- JP: Sorry – where were we?
- SH: You were talking about how martial arts are shown in films that aren't...
- JP: Yeah, yes – you know I think most action movies now, it's almost the norm, where if there's going to be any kind of fight sequence or, or anything else like that which doesn't involve weapons, there's gonna be some element of martial arts in there, even at a very basic level – whether it's a few kicks or a throw or something along those lines. Whereas in the older films, you know, the war films and other action-type films – it's more of a straight fisticuffs type of – there's a lot more effort gone into making them now (Pitter).

Mentioning the same film, another informant tells me that 'I like the martial arts used in *The Matrix* - in that instance it actually helped advance the plot, y'know – as opposed to just throwing it in there for the entertainment value,' but later adds that *The Matrix* stands out – like a diamond in the rock, basically. It did something good for the martial arts, I mean it's so rare that a film does that. Along the same lines is a film like *Blade*. I dunno – Wesley Snipes is notorious - they did some really, really cool sequences in that (Cebula)

Interestingly, though, this informant's views about the impact of Hollywood's increased use of martial arts in mainstream actioners seem somewhat confused or ambivalent. This is apparent from the next section I quote from his interview, in which he points to both "good" and "bad" aspects of Hollywood's use of them:

I think a lot more with the martial arts has been shown to America through the cinema of Hollywood – so, I mean Hollywood is setting the precedents that most people are judging things by, in that respect. Whereas people who actually start like practicing the martial arts in the states, I mean they all wanna come in and beat Bruce Lee - you start to realize martial arts is a lifestyle and not just a – a way to beat the hell outta somebody. And that isn't demonstrated in films in Hollywood (Cebula).

Pitter, though, is less ambivalent about the use and representation of martial arts in more mainstream action films, saying at one point that:

I think it's a good thing – because as I said, in the course of a year there's not that many films you're gonna go and see, and if you want to see action films, very few of them are really martial arts films, and if you do enjoy martial arts, which I do, then there is that element of spectacle about them,

which he believes is available to experiencers in films such as *The Matrix* and *Blade* as well as in Hong Kong and Chinese martial arts action cinema. Indeed, Pitter

suggests later that he feels martial arts are better represented in “mainstream” Hollywood action films than in Hollywood martial arts films; he indicates this when he says ‘the only time it’s misrepresented, I think, is when – there is, where the fact that somebody is doing martial arts is a feature of the film’ rather than as just an accepted aspect of the character/s involved.

A good laugh

Many informants say they enjoy laughing at martial arts action films, whether or not they like them on other levels. Typically these informants embrace the fact that martial arts films are formulaic in terms of plot, and enjoy the ways in which the films revolve around notions of honor and revenge as plot devices. One informant, for instance, says ‘*Hard Target* is fun... [because] John Woo knows how to cook with cheese’ (John), and another says that in general she watches Jackie Chan films ‘at times because they are so cheesy’ (Denton).

Another informant tells of the time he made his sister watch *Sudden Death* with him and ‘we had a good time because we were making fun of it,’ saying she didn’t like it but found it entertaining ‘because it was kind of hokey’ (Shawn). Additionally, an informant who is a martial arts and other action film fan says she often enjoys laughing at the films, saying of Van Damme, ‘I would never take him seriously, I think he’s fun;’ of Seagal that ‘now he can be funny when he takes *himself* too seriously;’ and that both of them could do to ‘play more tongue in cheek, like Stallone does’ (Anon #2). Other informants cite the humour in Jackie Chan’s films as a key reason for enjoying his work, and one informant gives the reason that ‘some of them can be funny, in their own ways’ (Pitter) right at the start of his interview, in response to my question of what he likes about martial arts action films.

It’s beautiful to watch

When explaining why they like martial arts action films, several informants refer to the beauty of some of the images in the films. Tielking, for instance, writes that

Actually my most favorite scene from a martial arts film was from Jet Li’s *The Tai Chi Master*, and it’s just Jet out there practicing tai chi by himself, but it’s beautiful – much more lovely than when he’s fighting someone;

while Fischer says

I like martial arts films if the people are graceful and look like they know what they’re doing. The it’s really neat to watch them – it’s like a dance. But when it just becomes a lot of people beating up a lot of other people – I don’t want to watch;

and McDonald writes:

I love martial arts films, I think most of them are beautiful, most look like they contain ballet or some kind of dance movements in them, especially samurai or ninja films.

The ideas expressed here that martial arts moves can look like dancing are unsurprising to many martial arts practitioners; Ashton says that dancers (and soccer players) often make good martial artists, and Clancy comments that

I mean a lot of martial arts come from dancing. Bruce Lee wanted Nureyev – wanted to train him. He thought he could make him into the ultimate fighter. And Lee uses music, too - to bring some kind of a rhythm out.

Other informants also indicate that they find martial arts films attractive to watch, although most of them only think this about scenes and sequences that are not “violent.” This attitude is expressed in Andrea’s assertion that ‘um, I like Bruce Lee films, I mean I like action like that, but I don’t like violent type action;’ another informant’s that ‘I like watching it when they’re just practicing, or training, y’know – when you just see them, like, moving slowly in the sunlight or on the beach or whatever. That looks good’ (Jen); and another’s that ‘sometimes the movements look beautiful – even when they’re fighting, but not when they get *real* gory, though’ (Anon #2).

Some informants say they find certain martial arts film stars beautiful to watch.

Edwards, for instance, writes:

I admire Jean-Claude’s martial arts very much. He moves his body so well and is so flexible and agile. I think Jean-Claude is a very handsome, attractive man with a fantastic body. I must admit I like his looks as much as I admire his artistic ability,

while Sally says:

I like that guy – the actor in *The Perfect Weapon* [Jeff Speakman] – he’s attractive. It’s worth watching some of those films for that, y’know – Jean-Claude Van Damme’s not bad, either. He’s pretty hot.

Similarly, Michael Stokes suggests that the films attract women and gay men because of their often ‘well-groomed’ stars such as Van Damme. He says ‘I think a lot of those martial arts guys are very attractive’ (Stokes) and another says of Van Damme:

His inability to stay married and his self-centred, well-groomed good looks are the major clues to the likeliness of his gayness. Sorry if that seems stereotypical thinking, but after these two ideas, the rest is fantasy (Anon. #6).

In addition, the only informant who identifies herself as lesbian says ‘our gay male friends adore him – they think he’s gorgeous. If he’s not gay, perhaps he has a gay sensibility or something?’ (Beth), and Denton writes that ‘I had a friend who had a crush on him. Certainly, then, a number of informants recognize that film experiencers watch martial arts action films as much for their visual attractions as for other reasons, and some are also aware of the homoeroticism of the films for some watchers. At the same time, other informants dismiss this aspect of the films’ appeal, saying for instance ‘I love the films, but no, I don’t find the performers attractive as a rule’ (Anon. #2) and ‘Van Damme’s not so attractive – he’s just another kickboxer turned actor’ (Wilkerson).

LEARNING FROM MARTIAL ARTS ACTION CINEMA

Given that at least thirty-three of the sixty-seven informants I cite in this study either practice or have previously practiced a martial art (or arts), it is perhaps unsurprising that many identify their status as martial artists as significant in shaping the perspective from which they watch and/or otherwise experience martial arts action films. While a few informants say that watching martial arts action films played a part in their becoming martial arts practitioners (Pitter says this, for example, and Kumar writes ‘Believe it or not I was inspired by Van Damme’s first movie *Bloodsport*’), most say that their interest in the films developed from or is shaped by their identity as a martial artist.

Many martial artists say they “learn” from the films, even while they seem well aware that the moves shown in films are not always “realistic” in terms of fighting. Clark, for instance, says ‘it’s kind of nice to see – I mean from my viewpoint, I mean I’ve been in tae kwon do three years now, and I kind of have a grasp of like what someone can really do and what’s really staged, y’know,’ and Roberts says she enjoys martial arts action cinema because

the more I practice and learn about it, watching it makes me love it more. I watch it for the action, but also because I love the kicking and various other moves. And I also learn more about it.

Many informants claim they get more from martial arts action films because they practice martial arts themselves, and Burgess writes that ‘I would like to say that through watching action movies, it has given me motivation to do my training.’ Some of these practitioner-informants do not understand why anyone *not* involved with martial arts would watch the films - responding to the question “Who watches martial

arts films?” by saying ‘I think, er, people who are into martial arts in general, even practicing the martial arts, are sometimes’ and then adds:

as for people who only – only like the martial arts movies as opposed to being involved in martial arts – I don’t have a demographic analysis of it, but I would think – well, you kind of wonder, I guess! I don’t know what the appeal is – or how non-martial artists perceive the fight scenes, y’know – and that interests me (Luke).

When I ask Ashton if he thinks martial arts action films are more interesting to martial arts practitioners than non-practitioners, he replies that ‘if you know something about something it makes it more interesting, sure, but then it also makes you more of a critic about it’ – an opinion evident in many other martial artists’ responses. One informant, for example, says ‘the guys – there’s some good technique in some of these movies’ (Riley), while others say:

as I learn more about martial arts I can see how poor fights are in movies – a real fight would never look like that. There are too many flaws in it from my point of view’ (Luke),

and that the moves in films are too simplified to teach anything about fighting ‘because fighting... martial arts is a very difficult, tricky, messy reality’ (John). From these comments it is clear that the different experiencers cited are looking to learn different things from martial arts action films. Those who say they can learn from the films are more concerned with form, technique and moves that look good and would stretch them; on the other hand, those who say the films can’t teach anything because the fights don’t show “realistic” moves, seem to be looking to learn about fighting rather than about form and technique. Elaborating further on why martial arts action films don’t show “realistic” fights and (thus) moves from which a watcher could learn how to fight, John points out that

Watching a real martial artist is like watching a tree or something like that – y’know, it’s magnificent, but it’s not good cinema! And neither is watching a fight – it either happens really fast and it’s not pretty, or maybe it takes a long time – you don’t know,

and that in films ‘of necessity the movements are slowed down, they’re made bigger, sound effects are added, and so on.’ This in itself, though, does not necessarily mean martial arts practitioners dislike the films – even though the “realism” of the films is of some considerable concern to a large number of them, as I discuss further below.

Whilst many informants see their identity as martial artists as a shaping influence on their perceptions and attitudes to martial arts films, then, overall martial arts practitioner informants hold a wide range of attitudes to the films, and do not

necessarily share similar combinations of perspectives; similarly, not all martial arts practitioners experienced martial arts films “as” the same type of thing. Also, most of them recognize that non-martial artists might well assume that their status as martial artists might orientate them towards the films in particular ways (and indeed in general) – as borne out by many non martial artist responses to the question of who watches martial arts action films.

MARTIAL ARTS ACTION FILMS AS REPRESENTATIONS OF MARTIAL ARTS

Perhaps unsurprisingly for informants involved in martial arts themselves, a perspective of experience often in evidence is that of experiencing martial arts action cinema as *representations of martial arts*. However, it is not only martial artists who express an interest in the films from the perspective of their representations of martial arts. Other informants are concerned about the apparent disparities between representations of martial arts and martial artists, and what they know about martial arts and martial artists in “real life.”

In any case, informants who experience martial arts action cinema as being significant to ways in which martial arts are represented and perceived are in the majority, although their particular reasons for thinking about the films from this perspective differ. Some feel the films are interesting or even useful to them because they can potentially learn from them, as illustrated above, while others are more concerned about whether the films’ representations are accurate or truthful representations of martial arts – especially when those representations might, as many informants suggest, influence how martial arts (and therefore martial artists) are seen by non-practitioners and/as society at large.

Insofar as learning from the films is concerned, I have already presented comments from those who enjoy watching films in order to ‘pick up new moves’ (Garringen). On a less positive note, though, Luke points out that while the films offer the potential for seeing great technique, they don’t always deliver: ‘I saw *The Quest* only because it was supposed to have so many styles of martial arts in it. I wanted to see muay thai, the real thing. But he didn’t fight muay thai.’ This type of disappointment is fairly common amongst informants, although many of them simultaneously don’t actually *expect* to see much “realistic” fighting because they are well aware of the constraints and limitations of filmmaking. John suggests that the result is that films

make martial arts [look] both less and more dangerous or violent than they really are. Less in the sense that, er, that the things that really work, the things that really hurt people, you don't really get to see... On the other hand it makes it look more dangerous – y'know, one strike and down somebody goes.

Similar concerns are expressed by other informants who train at a high level in martial arts, such as Aitchison, who says:

The biggest problem I have with the actual fighting is – is that it's not done in a realistic manner. People - I think it's bad because, well, people will do very, very damaging, very deadly things, and yet they, y'know, they won't get hurt.

Although Waldbusser's opinion that 'I think it's getting more accurate' is not unique, most informants express doubts about the "accuracy" of martial arts action cinema's representations of martial arts and martial artists. Specifically, many martial artists reference the unrealistic nature of many of the fights in martial arts action films, pointing out that 'you can get kicked like ten thousand times in the face and you can keep fighting back and if that happened' (Waldbusser), and that 'the way they keep coming back for more in those movies – it's crazy! One or two really good kicks and you win – or you should - that's the way it goes, that's how it is' (Anon. #5). (As Ashton confirms, unlike in the movies 'one kick, well that should be enough force – breaking two boards is equivalent to breaking any bone in the body except the femur and the skull.')

Another particular concern articulated by many informants – especially martial arts practitioners – is that the films often fail to show how much work and training goes into becoming an even basically proficient martial artist. Responding to Muller's comments about how martial arts in reality and martial arts in films are as different for her as 'wrestling and pro-wrestling,' Fischer says:

I never thought of them as the same thing either – and they've certainly become more separate for me. They never show any of the quieter stuff or any of the work in the movies.

Echoing this, in response to my questions about whether martial arts are represented accurately in martial arts action cinema, many informants complain that '[m]any, or most [martial arts action films], don't tell the reasons for martial arts' (Garringen); suggest that 'they should stress martial arts as used for defense' (Cowen); and/or also point out that

in many ways [martial arts action films] cannot accurately depict to the public how you do martial arts, how you actually train. I mean, I've been doing martial arts for how many years and I'm still a novice... in a two hour movie, you can't really depict that (Shawn).

Responding to similar questions, Andrea says ‘No, not accurate – well, the place where I studied there was a lot of like philosophy – and you know, you learned this so you didn’t have to use it.’ However, she adds that in Jackie Chan’s film, *Rumble in the Bronx*, ‘I mean, he didn’t want to fight – he has to;’ she also says at the start of the interview, when I ask if she likes martial arts action films as a rule, ‘I like Bruce Lee films, I mean I like action like that, but I don’t like violent-type action.’ Echoing this ambivalent perspective, Shawn says ‘I think some of them are violent – but certain types are the most pacifist I’ve ever seen,’ while when I ask Clancy “Are martial arts films especially violent?” he says:

it doesn’t seem to me as if their accent is on violence – because usually you don’t see them going around on the defensive, they’re usually fighting defensively. And they don’t show – most of them don’t *show* the exceedingly violent things about the martial arts. They show the stuff that people want to see – like mostly the flashy stuff like high kicks... That’s exactly why Van Damme’s so popular - because he can do all those kicks and it looks good on the screen.

Here, then, are multiple indicators of another prevalent perspective on martial arts action films – that they might be perceived as violent, but people who actually watch them don’t see them that way, or at least want to emphasize the degree to which the “violence” in them is tempered by other aspects of plot or representation, and anyway is not “real.” More generally, many informants agree with Cebula’s claim that:

I think the way the martial arts is typically portrayed is not necessarily the way martial arts are in the world, but more of a fantasy – like usually in a Hollywood film, like the martial arts are used as a spectacle.

Explaining the way she makes sense of martial arts action films as opposed to martial arts, Muller told me: ‘I kind of separate it in my head – kind of like wrestling and pro-wrestling,’ having recognized that ‘It looked to me a whole lot more violent in films than it is really. I mean we haven’t done a whole lot of kicking each other in the head!’ Here, the reasons for informants’ concerns about the “unrealistic” or inaccurate representations of martial arts in films are indicated. Informants often care precisely because they worry that many people who don’t practice martial arts – or who don’t know people who do – will see martial arts action films and think that real-life martial arts practitioners are somehow “like” the fictional characters in the films. This leads to a lot of ambivalence as far as attitudes to martial arts action films are concerned, especially for martial arts practitioners who also make a living from teaching martial

arts: Ashton, for instance, says that 'How it's presented – that bothers me more than if they're really good or not,' while Clancy says

There's two main things that I've always ... one that I love and one that I hate, about martial arts films. I mean I love them because they promote a lot of interest in martial arts – obviously people see the movies and, you know, they wanna do that, they wanna train. But the thing that I hate about it is that it promotes a lot of the falsehoods about martial arts – and the things that instructors – if they want to train people in a realistic fashion – they want to steer them away from that kind of thing. A lot of the myths of martial arts, you know, a lot of movies believe in the pressure point and the death touch – and they teach that and kids see it and they think it's real. Or the ability to hit someone in the nose and drive it into their brain, or the power of the head-level kick to knock someone out. It's just – there's a lot of stuff... it's very frustrating, but it's also great.

Countering this to some degree are comments that suggest non-practitioners and practitioners alike are surely aware that much of what they see in martial arts action films is not realistic: Cebula, for instance, comments that while 'I can't think of any that are realistic – I mean, even a film like *The Karate Kid*, that's not the way people live who do the martial arts,' continuing to point out that 'I don't think like – the people I interact with don't believe the stuff in the movies is going on.' In a similar vein, other informants express their disbelief that the films' representations could "fool" viewers:

Carl: I can't believe anyone – that people watch these and think yeah, this is what it's like – they can't believe it's what I'm like, you know...

Mike: Right, man, cause they – they must know *you* can't do no death touch!

Carl: That's not what I mean – I mean, you don't need to see a fight to know that I – you know, like, you can't get up – you can't get *up* when some guy's hit you hard, like maybe four or five times. You can't – you *know* you're not gonna get up then, whatever anyone – whether they fight or not – whatever anyone sees in the movies.

In general, though, a prevalent concern amongst informants is that the representations of martial arts in and by martial arts action films 'probably promote[s] the idea that the point of practicing a martial art is to be able to beat people up' (Tielking): Even though many informants recognize that 'This is of course a primary motivation for some people to practice some arts,' most share the view expressed when Tielking continues by writing that

But it's not the only reason. For lots of people, martial arts are sports: they do tae kwon do or judo so they can compete with others, like in tennis or something. For others, the main point is exercise and improving their own health. Yet others practice a martial art in hopes of spiritually or mentally improving themselves somehow. If martial arts films tend to promote the growth of one kind of martial art to the detriment of the other kinds, then that's bad.

Encapsulating in one brief comment what a number of informants feel about this, Pesek says that 'I don't care for the way martial arts is presented in action movies.' This sentiment is oft-repeated by informants: As I mention above, Garringen articulates the complaint of many that 'Many, or most [martial arts action films], don't tell the reasons for martial arts,' and Muller says that 'it's disrespectful if they don't represent it correctly.'

In a related way, when I ask martial arts practitioners if they think martial arts films affect people's impressions of them, they all reply that yes, they believe the films do have an impact on how martial arts practitioners are perceived. Aitchison replies, for instance, 'Oh yes, definitely – people are afraid of me,' adding that it's ridiculous, especially if they know that 'I'm planning on teaching elementary school, like third grade.' Similarly, another informant tells me that:

when people find out – they know I fight, here and – they treat me different, even if they've never been to one or whatever – people who I meet here [at tournaments] see me different, other people are afraid, even though they weren't before (Anon. #5).

Also, Waldbusser says:

I don't know if it's the movies' fault or – it probably has to do with the movies, but it seems like anytime you tell people you're in any martial art or something – they're like 'oh are you gonna kick my ass now?' or – you know, kind of joking, but they expect you to maybe fly off and do something that maybe they've seen in a movie, and that – it's kind of annoying. Your friends say, y'know, whatever, but when other people you meet say that you're like, 'you have no idea what you're talking about and you're just acting stupid' – what I want to tell them really, but of course you can't.

A rather more ambivalent attitude to the attractions of martial arts films is expressed by Shawn, but the basic idea that some people watch for the "violence" is apparent:

Shawn: I think a lot of guys like them just because of the violence.

SH: Why?

Shawn: I dunno – perhaps it interests them. Because it seems that people that are able to do that kind of violence have some kind of power. You know what I mean? This big fat guy is oppressing some little people, and here comes the lone

stranger that beats the crap out of whoever's doing what they shouldn't – and he has that power to liberate, or whatever.

SH: Is it important that he's using his power to help the oppressed, then?

Shawn: It seems like it's a good idea, but it's not always the case. In real life, people that have that kind of violent power don't always use it for liberating poor oppressed people.

SH: So, like, do you think these guys would still watch if the bad guys won?

Shawn: Well - I think one of the enticing things is not just to help people out, but the power (Shawn).

Here, Shawn is playing with two opposing ideas about “violence” in martial arts action cinema, trying to steer a course somewhere between condemning the films and acknowledging that the violence is couched in terms of helping ‘oppressed’ people. He both recognizes and appreciates that the “good guy” tends to win, and that the “violence” is geared towards positive social outcomes, but is simultaneously wary because he believes that a number of ‘guys’ watch the same “violence” and enjoy the ‘power’ of it rather than the way in which it ‘help[s] people out.’ Clearly, in many ways film experiencers’ views of and attitudes towards martial arts action cinema depend in large part on which side of this debate they come down on. And while the position each experiencer takes seems to depend in significant part on whether or not they actually watch martial arts action films, my research suggests that this is far from being the only aspect of identity that impacts such positioning. Before discussing this further, I present a range of ways in which informants talk and write about “violence.”

MARTIAL ARTS ACTION CINEMA &/AS “VIOLENCE”

Concerns about the perceived violence of martial arts and the films that represent them are evident in comments about representations of martial arts in the martial arts action cinema. Many informant comments blend these concerns together, such as when Morris, responding to my question about what views of martial arts he thinks are promoted by martial arts action films, says:

Well, I've never taken martial arts but I think most martial arts teachers express non-violence and using it as self-defense, and I think that in most martial arts movies – Sonny Chiba's, for example - they're the violent aggressors, they practice the exact opposite of what actual martial arts teach. I think that's sort of shameful, but... it's a movie.

Certainly the concern about whether or not martial arts action films are perceived (especially by non-practitioners) as “violent” or not is of central importance to many

informants – and is often raised long before I bring up the issue. Indeed, a clear aspect of experience of martial arts action cinema revolves around the notion of “violence” and public debates that use such a term for action films across the board. An interesting trend, though, is that informants who watch martial arts action films often say that they are not particularly violent, but informants unfamiliar with the films under discussion almost invariably express the belief that the films *are* violent. (This is not a straightforward division, not least because there is more than one “type” of martial arts film.) So Tielking, for instance, writes that ‘in the martial arts films I’ve seen, martial arts skills are used in combat a lot. I understand that there are martial arts films where the art is used mainly in sporting competition, but I don’t think I’ve seen a single one like that.’ Then, while saying he has never watched a Van Damme film, he says of them:

I can only generalize from other martial arts films and from the ads for his films, and it looks to me like they glorify violence. Beyond that I’ll reserve judgment until I actually see one.

In contrast, an informant who *has* seen a number of Van Damme’s films writes that:

I think that in terms of violence in his films he never uses it aggressively more as a way to protect himself and others because being a hero he must be a defender (Kumar).

The discrepancy here is interesting, especially as the former comment comes from a non-watcher of the film “violence” about which he comments, while the latter is ‘a former fan of Jean-Claude’ (Kumar). Certainly this suggests that ‘generaliz[ing] from other martial arts films’ and the ‘ads’ for Van Damme’s films provides a film experienter with a different sense of the films than does actually watching them. Of course it could be argued that the discrepancy might be accounted for by differences in the two informants’ attitudes and understandings of what constitutes “violence.” I would not deny this, but do not think it necessarily overrides the significance of my first point, especially since such discrepancies often appear in the views expressed by informants who have watched the films in question and those who have not.

More specifically, the idea that martial arts action films are violent and glorify violence is evident in the responses of nearly every informant who identifies him/herself as a non-watcher or only occasional watcher of martial arts action cinema. One such informant writes that ‘these films make martial arts seem nothing like an art but rather just another fun way to hurt another person’ (Gahn); another that the films promote the attitude that ‘violence solves all problems’ which is ‘terrible’ (Rachel); and another says that ‘they’re violence for boys who wanna see that stuff’ (Jen); while another says ‘My guess would be that they promote violence and suffering – that men should fight’

(Beth). In response to my question, “Do you think martial arts films are especially violent?”, non-watcher informants write ‘yes – I think they should stress martial arts as used for defense [because] under poor parental supervision they could instill fantasies and violent tendencies’ (Cowen); ‘yes – they really are’ (Anon. #3); and ‘yes - I think that there is enough violence in the world without its justification through useless martial arts films’ (Anon. #1). In addition, Pesek says martial arts action films are about ‘senseless violence, physical prowess, and domination,’ and when I ask her why she doesn’t enjoy martial arts action films she responds: ‘Because I don’t like senseless violence.’ This is particularly interesting because Pesek is also completely open about her lack of experience of martial arts action cinema, at one point reporting that although she has seen *Mortal Kombat* three times (because her partner ‘really likes it’), ‘other than that I don’t think I’ve seen any’ martial arts films, and saying of Seagal and Van Damme’s movies, ‘yeah, I think their movies have been on HBO and Jason’s been watching and I’ve seen a few seconds and then left.’ Similarly, when I asked Muller if she feels martial arts action films are violent or not, she said:

It seems like it to me. Based on my limited knowledge, it seems like the whole part of martial arts they take is the violent part.

In a similar vein, the participants of a group interview had the following to say:

SH:	Do you like martial arts films, as a rule?
Krystal:	No, they’re too violent.
Shelby:	...they’re too <i>boring</i> !
Jen:	I think some of them are, like, okay, y’know. But as a <i>rule</i> ? No, I don’t – I don’t like them much, you know.
Shelby:	...you like some?
Krystal:I think they suck.
SH:	Why don’t you like them?
Krystal:	They don’t have anything to them – no story, no acting ability, no – they’re just violent, they’re violence for boys who wanna see that stuff, and I – I don’t wanna see some guy beat up some other guy, you know...
Shelby:	... right, that’s what they do – what they’re about. The ones I’ve seen, they’re about hitting people and – well, that’s it I...
Jen:	Not all of them. Most are violent, yeah, but they do – there’s a story, y’know...
Shelby:	... yeah, a story about getting beaten up. Like that’s so interesting!
SH:	Which films have you seen?
Shelby:	Um, like maybe two – a Steven Seagal one - more, I dunno... but not all the way through, I just see – you know, I’ve seen some on cable.
Christine:	I’ve seen some Bruce Lee and some Jean-Claude ones, and <i>Mortal Kombat</i> , but that had no plot...
Krystal:	...I don’t want to see any, I mean - they’re too gory.

Christine: I saw one I liked – with Jean-Claude Van Damme. It had that actress – you know, one of the Arquettes... anyway, she was in it and it was okay. There was some fighting, but mainly it was – it was okay.

SH: Was it how you expected it to be?

Christine: How I expected it? Well I guess no, it was – I didn't want to see it – but it was okay, not like the others.

This segment shows yet again the willingness with which informants who have seen very few – if any – martial arts action films categorize them all as “violent.” Also, it is evident that here even the woman who claims ‘some’ martial arts action films aren't just violent feels that ‘most are violent’ and when she refers to one she ‘liked’ she adds that it was ‘not like the others’ (Christine). Andrea also expresses a judgment that martial arts films are “violent,” even though when talking about particular films she's seen she qualifies this description, saying:

I mean I'm not totally familiar with all martial arts films, but from what I have seen – they're violent, yeah, they're just as violent – I mean, but it's interesting to watch.³

Informants who have seen a number of martial arts films – whether or not they like them – often echo Clancy's above-cited view that ‘it doesn't seem to me as if their accent is on violence – because usually you don't see them going around on the defensive, they're usually fighting defensively,’ and that rather than violence, what is shown emphasizes ‘the stuff that people want to see – like mostly the flashy stuff like high kicks’ (Clancy). In this vein, informants say ‘no – there's just the right amount of violence’ (Garringen); ‘I don't think they're *violent*, no – not primarily – there are other things going on in them’ (Anon. #2); ‘the *films* [as opposed to martial arts] are violent but that's probably the only way to make a movie out of it – if people can be excited to watch it’ (Barnes); and

You see to me, if you've got an understanding of martial arts it's not – it's not just general violence, for a start. There is a – there is an artistic side of it' (Pitter).

One informant says that ‘I think some of them are violent, but certain types are the most pacifist I've ever seen,’ adding that ‘it depends what you define aggressive as’ (Shawn); another says ‘some films come across as all blood and violence – some put more plot in to take away from that’ but ‘a lot of them come across as just beating people up’ (Barnes); while another says ‘yeah, they're violent – but it's not *real*, however bloody or whatever – it's not *real* violence’ (Riley). When I ask Shawn why he

³ Andrea also identifies *Rumble in the Bronx* as non-violent, and says Bruce Lee's films are not ‘violent-type action,’ as cited above.

thinks the press attacks martial arts action films for being violent, he answers 'well they *are* violent,' but dismisses the idea that they cause film experiencers to act violently, saying:

I think that if all the Jean-Claude movies out there were got rid of and we never saw them again for the rest of our lives, there still would be violent people out there. I mean, if some Van Damme or Seagal movie out there is making you beat up some poor old lady on the street, you've got more problems than watching movies.

Still, a number of informants who watch martial arts and action films do think martial arts films are pretty violent – although in general they seem to regard this as less bad or harmful than do non-watcher informants. Ashton, for instance, says 'Sure, a lot of the ones I've seen are very violent,' while Clark says that

I think in martial arts – like in some movies, like in the past they've been quite like violent – like all bloody and gory and stuff, when in reality even if you did do full contact tae kwon do or any other martial arts – I mean yes it's possible for people to break their arms or get bloodied up, but I think in the movies it's really well overdone... lately there have been a coupla movies that I've seen that have been really quite gory as far as fighting is concerned.

Another informant says he does not think martial arts films are "especially" violent, but sees the type of violence they represent as problematic, writing that:

Martial arts films do not contain a greater amount of violence than other action films. However, the violence is more personal for it involves hand-to-hand combat rather than just shooting someone and then saying a cute one-liner (Gahn).

Another says:

Yes I'd call them violent. When a career martial artist tries to punch someone, that's use of deadly force. And frequently there are swords or other weapons involved. I suppose they're less violent than many war movies, though, in terms of amount and frequency of force used and number of people killed/wounded. (Actually, some of them *are* war movies, aren't they?) I'd say *Bride With White Hair* was at least as violent as *Die Hard II* (Tielking).

One informant points out that 'there is quite a lot of violence in the films but it does come with the territory' and therefore does not concern her all that much (McDonald).

Other informants emphasize that while they regard martial arts films as somewhat "violent," they are considerably less violent than many other action films. For instance, one informant says:

Yeah, they're pretty violent, but with guns – well, it depends on how you use the guns – how you use them, how you use the martial arts, for that matter. I mean there's movies like, what is it –

Lionheart? – where, y’know, there’s brain damage for everybody – on the house - and teeth are everywhere, where there’s plenty of gratuitous soft tissue injury and stuff. And that kind of thing’s quite violent. On the other hand I don’t think it’s any more violent – in fact I think it’s less violent – than something like *Reservoir Dogs*, where y’know, you have people blasted and then they lie there for a while percolating blood (John),

while another writes that Van Damme’s (and other martial arts films stars’)

martial arts are primarily for self-defence, generally he is attacked first and then responds to a given situation. Compared with other action stars I do not feel that the violence in his films is excessive. Chow Yun Fat’s gun play is far more violent in my mind. Less people are killed in Jean-Claude’s films. He has mostly tried to keep the violence down to hopefully promote some level of story (Gilzean).

Roberts suggests something along similar lines when she writes that:

I don’t think [martial arts films] are any more violent than other action packed films. They are nothing like *Commando* and those kinds of movies. They are violent, but not as violent as most action films;

and Morris points out that martial arts films

don’t seem to be any more violent than lots of other films. It seems to me that mostly... the plot’s usually revenge-based, like somebody gets killed and then the hero or heroine has to avenge the death of their loved one in some violent fashion. But it doesn’t seem to me any more violent than, say, *The Long Kiss Goodnight*.

Yet another informant, Crisman, argues that

I think it’s more balanced – because in something like *Rambo* or a shoot-em-up army thriller, you know, you’ve got a definite good and evil, and the bad guys are gonna have to be blown up in the end – but in martial arts movies it’s more balanced – I think they sort of go through more of a personal development – like they face whatever problem they have, like the Karate Kid had to control his own emotions and learn at the same time;

McKim says:

I think martial arts films are very violent – but it’s on a different level, it’s not blood and guts or anything like that - there’s no, er, I mean there’s no people blowing up or... I mean when you see the, er, footage, the people – when they get kicked you can’t tell they’ve been kicked or injured. Most of them aren’t shown on the ground, moaning – there’s no blood or anything like that, so – yes, violent, but it’s not – I think guns are a lot more violent than, y’know, kicks. It’s a little more graphic in that it may have one move after another after another – but – so there’s several kicks instead of one gunshot, but I don’t see that as more violent *per se*;

while Pitter agrees that martial arts is ‘no more violent than somebody running around with a gun... and shooting six, seven, eight, nine, ten people;’ and Luke says:

- VL: Having only seen American movies, I don't think they're – they're violent, obviously, but there are a lot of films that have no hand-to-hand combat in them that are violent too.
- SH: What do you think about guns?
- VL: In some ways, y'know, I think guns are worse – because, you know, guns are more real than a jump-spin-kicking hero -

later adding that:

by nature they're violent – but I guess there are a lot of movies – from westerns to inner city to monster movies – that are violent in all sorts of violence. I'm more disturbed by movies that depict things like child abuse or spousal abuse or rape – or things like that that are just too brutal and get a little too close to real life. I think the fantastical part of it keeps it in perspective, or whatever (Luke).

Here, the issue of “realism” arises again, as does the notion that the “violence” in martial arts films is less disturbing, less worrying, because it is distanced from reality. This is something brought up in and by many informants' responses,⁴ and is again something I discuss further below.

Another informant's response to my question about guns is that

I like – as far as violence is concerned I think that hand-to-hand stuff is a little bit better, y'know – more like defending yourself, y'know – but if you see a martial arts film and the guy has a weapon, well, you know, it's hard to say he has a weapon for self defense (Clark),

and another says:

I don't think they're any more violent than any other action films, I think – I think that if more of the fighting is – hand-to-hand, if there's not a lot of guns going off and bombs just blowing... then that's better (Waldbusser).

Echoing the idea that martial arts focused films are less “violent” than action films and other centering around guns, Muller says:

I prefer watching martial arts to guns – it seems like then, at least, maybe the person has a chance to defend themselves. I mean I know it's a movie, but – at the same time, a gun just isn't very interesting,

while Andrea comments that representing martial arts “violence” is at least ‘better than pulling out a gun,’ adding that ‘with guns you're taking an automatic weapon. I mean, anyone can shoot a gun, but not everyone can do martial arts. I mean it's an art’ (Andrea). And when I ask Clancy if he thinks martial arts films are like other action films in the context of discussing violence, he replies:

⁴ It is also, of course, something brought up and investigated in Hill's study.

I would say yeah, obviously they are – well, it's only my opinion but actually I'd say they're better – because, guns only really have one purpose, and martial arts, y'know, is controlled by our brain. You take that choice about whether you want to turn it up and hurt someone or whether you want to tone it down and just survive. I mean it's the difference between kicking someone in the leg – to hit the [psyatic/synaptic??] nerve to kill the footwork so that you can take a step back and give them a chance to quite, fwetting them to the groin, or landing a solid shot to the head. Some styles don't address it, some do – but guns *can't* because it just doesn't have the ability to – you know, anywhere you shoot someone they can bleed to death..... And they're also largely illegal, y'know, and they're just too dangerous, I think – it's too easy to pull the trigger. With martial arts, if you train with them, it requires some discipline, it takes a coupla years, so by the time you have this ability to hurt someone you have the control that goes with it so you *won't* hurt them.

Such views also seem to inform ideas expressed about ways in which martial arts films are not “about” violence, but rather about showcasing martial arts and performers who are extremely skilled, technically proficient and/or attractive. Many of the experiercer responses and comments cited here support this notion: Not one martial arts film watcher focuses on “violence” when explaining why they watch and enjoy martial arts action films, and many make clear that they enjoy the ‘escapism,’ ‘excitement’ and ‘pace’ of the films, and the experience of watching someone performing amazing moves rather than the “fights” which are anyway pretend.

Sharing the general view that martial arts films aren't especially violent, but showing some reservations about the extent of ‘graphic violence’ in some martial arts films, Norpel writes:

I feel they are violent to a certain extent. Not all films are graphically violent. Most of the more recent films use more blood and killing because that attracts attention. I feel that many movies could tone down this graphic violence. But people want to see violence and the movie-makers know this. It comes down to one thing (money).

Indeed, many informants who don't regard martial arts action films as especially violent still feel they should put more emphasis on showing the defensive as opposed to aggressive aspect of martial arts, and/or show less violence than they do. The majority of comments to this effect, though, are made when expressing concern about the possible effects of martial arts films on *children*. Tielking sums up many of the points made by watchers and non-watchers alike in this regard when he says:

Some of them I wouldn't show my children, for the reasons others have stated: they tend to emphasize violence as a means of resolving problems, to glamorize violence, to de-emphasize the negative

consequences of violence. The Hong Kong films are more likely to show people crying at the gravesite of a loved one, which is a plus, but they are also more likely to depict revenge as an appropriate motive for action, which is a minus (Tielking).

More positively, though,, Mueller answers my question “What do you think about young children watching martial arts films?” by writing:

It depends on what we mean by “young,” but generally speaking, movies like *The Perfect Weapon*, *The Karate Kid* trilogy, and *The Last Dragon* are good in that they teach kids that martial arts are for defense only and are not to be taken lightly. I think that movies that show violence for violence’s sake are pointless. So those I would recommend need to be seen under adult supervision, given the adult’s patience to sit through them.

The idea that parental supervision counteracts the potentially negative effects of martial arts films is fairly common amongst informants, with several commenting that ‘without good parental supervision watching them could lead to violent tendencies’ (Cowen); that ‘parents shouldn’t let their kids watch them’ (Sally); or that ‘you get into the whole area of what I think is the parents’ responsibility ... what the kids watch. No matter what they say, I can’t control that and they do have a major impact on that’ (Waldbusser).

In a related manner, some informants who do not necessarily dislike martial arts films still said ‘most aren’t suitable’ (Purdue) for children to watch. Jennifer Mendoza says that while her husband watches quite a few,

actually I try and discourage my children from watching them – just from the standpoint from, you know just with the violence. And typically I would think there might be guns or something... I really don’t want them thinking that kicking and hitting and hurting other people is a good way to deal with a conflict.

Similarly, while she writes that ‘I think that martial arts are great for kids because they teach them discipline and pride,’ Denton still thinks children should not be encouraged to watch martial arts films because ‘I think that kids who watch martial arts films just like it because they can beat the crap out of people. They don’t know about the discipline or anything else. Also, informants who feel children shouldn’t watch martial arts action films tended not to see as much difference between hand-to-hand combat and the use of guns in films, arguing for example that ‘I wouldn’t say one is better than the other – either way I don’t like the lack of repercussions’ (Pesek).

When I ask Luke “What do you think about children watching martial arts films?”, he is somewhat ambivalent, responding:

I think some of the films probably aren't appropriate – I think these films are geared for mature, more mature audiences – but I mean just the content of the film, I wouldn't let a young kid go see Steven Seagal, I mean as far as the fight scenes – I mean *The Karate Kid* emphasized the art side of the martial arts, and that's good – but you know, how much do people take away from the movie? I don't know. But it's at least good to include it.

Here, he raises not only the question of whether or not children should be allowed to see certain martial arts films, but of whether or not the films can be said to influence those who watch them ('how much do people take away from a movie?'). This question underpins many comments about the "violence" of martial arts and other action films – an area of response that I discuss further below.

Overall, informants express a wide range of views about the status of martial arts action cinema as "violent" or not, and about whether they view such "violence" negatively, positively, with ambivalence or indifference. Bormet's response to the question, "Do you think martial arts films are especially violent?" and "What do you think about this?", throws some light on why so many different opinions come from film experiencers as he writes:

No. The silly ones are however – they use excess violence as a selling point of the movie. Martial arts choreography is almost an art unto itself. A good fight scene doesn't have to be especially violent. I guess it also depends on how you see violence. Martial arts films are built around showing a particular art or arts, to do this you need action/fights. Some people see violence as any fight. Some see it as bloodshed. It all depends on perception and particular point of view.

This response is a complex one, and brings together a whole range of points and assumptions made by informants (as well as critics and theorists) about martial arts cinema and "violence." First, Bormet agrees with many other martial arts film watchers that the films are *not* 'especially violent;' he immediately qualifies this, though, by suggesting that *some* of them are – that is, the 'silly' ones 'use excess violence' – where he does not clarify any more than damning critics what categorizes violence as "excess." He then suggests that representations of fights are not necessarily "violent" anyway, arguing that whether an experiencer sees something as "violent" or not depends on *them* – their 'perception and particular point of view' – and not on the film itself. This informant thus raises some points of key interest and debate to both fellow informants and professional film critics and theorists concerning the legitimacy of screen violence, what constitutes screen "violence" in the first place, and the perspectival nature of knowledge.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE INFLUENCES & EFFECTS OF MARTIAL ARTS ACTION CINEMA

Despite living in a culture saturated with theories of media “effects,” *comparatively* few informants say watching martial arts action films – or any other films, for that matter – have direct “effects” on film experiencers. At the same time, many believe or suspect that watching them directly effects *children* – perhaps less surprising in a culture that often expresses concerns about media effects on children, and funds research on that rather than other types of audience research.

Also, while many informants feel that direct “effects” are not an issue, almost all seem to think that watching films might have an “influence” by means of promoting certain attitudes, values and/or ideas. This concern is evident throughout this chapter – especially where informants express concerns about the way martial arts action cinema represents martial arts to non-practitioners. But here I focus on responses to the specific question, “What kinds of attitudes and values do you think martial arts films promote?”

THE “EFFECTS” OF MARTIAL ARTS ACTION CINEMA

Not all informants make explicit assertions about the influence or effects of martial arts and other action films, but many do, and many more make comments that *imply* the films influence behaviour and/or attitudes. Many of the quotations I have already presented might be included in this discussion – and indeed I do revisit some of them. But in general, in this section I highlight informant comments that address the issue of “effects” most clearly.

Luke brings up the question of “effects” when discussing “violence” in martial arts films, saying ‘I don’t know if they’ve ever proved conclusively if there is or is not any direct effect on viewing violence versus acting out violence,’ but concludes that watching violence that is ‘just brutal and get[s] a little too close to real life’ (such as ‘child abuse or spousal abuse or rape’) is more of a problem, because the ‘fantastical part of [martial arts film violence] keeps it in perspective, or whatever.’⁵ Here, the distinction Luke seems to be making between real-life violence and what is represented in martial arts action cinema is precisely that while one is disturbing, the other is not *because* it is pretend, and also because it is not as “brutal” as real-life violence so often is. This

⁵ The full dialogue of this section of Luke’s interview is quoted earlier in this chapter.

distinction is implied by other informants, too – for instance when Greg says that ‘these movies aren’t *violent* – not like some movies are, with real nasty things going on.’

When one informant talks about his nephews imitating “violence” they see the Ninja Turtles perform, I ask him “Would young kids act like that anyway, without the films?” He is skeptical, responding that ‘They might, but I think a lot of it has to do with American culture and the amount of violence we’re bombarded with from the cathode ray’ (Morris). This is unsurprising in light of the informant’s earlier comments in response to my question “What do you think about violence in films, then?”:

- MM: I guess for me it seems easy to set aside that it’s just a movie, but I guess for some less thoughtful people it might be more, er, provoking. I dunno. I do think some people come out of movies like that – all tense and ready to get into a fight themselves, which is sad. But it doesn’t have that effect on me.
- SH: Is there a reason you think films effect some people?
- MM: I think all forms of media impress people in certain ways, and some people wouldn’t do things unless they saw them on TV or movies – because they’re too stupid to think of it themselves. Like the date-rape drug – I think a lot of dumb frat guys wouldn’t know what rohipnol was unless there were all these articles in the newspaper about it. Fortunately now it’s been made illegal.
- SH: So how does watching martial arts effect people?
- MM: I think a lot of people see a Bruce Lee movie and want to kick somebody’s ass – they already know how to fight. Then again, they also serve the purpose in releasing aggression. I suppose there’s a catharsis – you should not have to be aggressive because the hero of the movie already was for you. But unfortunately some people’s minds don’t work that way.

Here, Morris effectively outlines the two main approaches to media exemplified by theorists and critics who write about “violence” – that is, that “media violence” either causes harmful “effects,” or that it provides some kind of cathartic release so watchers do not act out violently. What is also made explicit in Morris’s articulation is the distancing of martial arts films watchers from the “I” that speaks: He asserts that ‘a lot of people see a Bruce Lee movie and want to kick somebody’s ass,’ and seems equally confident that ‘it doesn’t have that effect on me.’ Similarly, he identifies ways in which the violence in the films *ought* to work as a catharsis – so ‘you should not have to be aggressive because the hero of the movie already was for you’ – implying that while they work for him in that way, ‘some people’s minds don’t work that way’ – where those people are ‘less thoughtful people.’ Again, this echoes assumptions made and perpetuated by many critical and theoretical discourses about film and media more generally.

Other informants tend to restrict their comments about the behavioural “effects” of watching martial arts films to a discussion of child film experiencers. Cowen, as cited above, suggests that watching martial arts action films ‘without good parental supervision could lead to violent tendencies’ in children, and that many martial arts films ‘are too violent’ for children, while ‘others are ok with parental supervision to discuss the movie with the child – its assets and its faults.’ Another respondent agrees with Cowen, stating that martial arts films ‘perpetuate’ violence (Anon. #1), as does another who asserts that ‘watching these films make kids aggressive’ (Krystal), and another who writes ‘I don’t think that children should watch a lot of violence because I think it encourages them to act violent’ (Mahraun).

Others get quite annoyed at the assumptions made about how children are adversely effected by watching martial arts and other action films. For instance, when I ask Clancy “Do you think kids imitate what they see in the films?” he answers:

Yes. But if you apply any kind of general rule to it, you’re gonna be missing the point. Like they say, y’know, movies and violence causes kids to do this – it’s not movies. When they get out they’re not even thinking of the movie for more than half an hour. And if you do get kids coming in to train in order to use it for violent purposes, the instructor just has to be able to say ‘well, you’re not gonna train in my school;

Clark makes a similar point, although he *is* concerned that ‘I think kids that are in [martial arts] understand – but those that don’t, then I have – I mean, I have a real problem with because they might get the wrong idea about martial arts;’ he emphasizes that he does *not* believe that watching martial arts films or other “film violence” effects children’s behaviour directly, saying:

I hope people are aware – and kids too - I mean, you know, whatever happens in a movie, you know, it’s all fake – they do takes over and over again... If the parents can’t make the kids understand the difference, it’s entirely their fault.

Similarly, Crisman allows that ‘maybe kids are impressionable, but – it seems like anything can make kids violent these days!’

Another informant’s response to the question “What do you think about young children watching action films?” is that ‘It’s part of our society to teach children how to hate and what to do if their [sic] too dumb to work out their differences with others in a civilized manner so I guess it’s ok’ (Gahn). Here, Gahn’s dislike of martial arts films is deliberately clear; he also, though, points to the belief that even if martial arts films don’t “effect” children’s behaviour directly, they might influence ways in which watchers

deal with conflict – concerns also expressed by other informants when they consider the question of whether children should watch martial arts and other action films (Mendoza, Pesek, Cowen).

Also, while most informants do not suggest that martial arts or other action cinema “violence” has direct, behavioural “effects” on experiencers who watch them, many *are* concerned that the way many martial arts and action films represent martial arts themselves might have a negative influence on how martial arts (and their practitioners) are perceived by non-practitioners. As I discuss earlier in this chapter, many informants who practice martial arts watch and enjoy martial arts films at least in part to “learn” from them, where generally what they expect to learn are new moves and techniques rather than fighting skills. And many more informants – mostly but not all martial arts practitioners themselves – are concerned about the way in which martial arts are represented in and by martial arts and other action films, as I also discuss above. Overall, it seems that informants are more concerned about the ways in which martial arts and action films more generally represent martial arts and martial artists than they are concerned that martial arts films might cause film experiencers who watch them to act in a violent manner.

Attitudes towards censorship

Several informants express views about censorship, although I only once raise the issue with an informant (Pitter). Such comments occur mostly in letters from *Impact* readers, suggesting that wanting to express such views forms part of the motive for writing; the other direct comment came during the course of an interview in which I say “lots of martial arts films are censored,” then ask “What do you think of that?” Only one US informant comments on the issue of censorship – perhaps because UK censors are notorious for cutting martial arts films, especially those starring Bruce Lee.

When I ask Pitter about censorship, he first comments on “violence” in martial arts films, and then, using an example of British censorship (of *Enter the Dragon*), returns to the issue, saying:

JP: So I dunno, I’m always unhappy with it – I guess it can be justified on the basis that when, when people see martial arts films they see people doing all of this stuff – without weapons – and doing things with their own bodies and thinking, ‘well he’s just a man, I must be able to do that myself.’ So I mean perhaps it’s because it’s closer to reality in that sense, people may be more inclined to do it.

SH: Or to try!

JP: Yes – to copy – let’s not say do it, but to copy it in a harmful

way. Because let's not mess around, martial arts *can* be dangerous in their own way, used in the wrong way – particularly when people try to do something that they don't – they don't know anything about. And I suppose the - the censoring can be justified in that ...[unclear]... but when adults watch them they should be able to put that into context.

SH: Right.

JP: I mean if it's just protecting children I think you've got to look at, y'know, the way that they censor or don't censor – or at the access that children have to films including other kinds of violence which are more gory.

Later, Pitter makes it clear that he does *not* believe children are generally any more or less "effected" by watching martial arts action films than adults (as I discuss above); this underscores his belief that censorship makes him 'unhappy,' and that he does not think it is applied appropriately or fairly to martial arts action cinema.

Responses to my letter in *Impact* (that does not mention censorship) share Pitter's frustration with censors. Hall, for instance, writes:

You will find that most martial arts addicts obtain their collection through bootleg video suppliers. The main reason being that our draconian censorial climate comes down hard on movies containing bone-crunching self-defence and exotic weaponry. Bruce Lee's entire back-catalogue is among the most heavily cut martial arts material in the UK. It's no wonder his films sell well on the underground scene, where full uncut, widescreen versions are in great demand. I don't mind supporting the black marketeers if they provide an honourable service to their customers, some do some don't, but it's a chance many fight fans are willing to take and with the BBFC's attitude to martial arts movies who can blame them?

And in his letter, Freeman writes:

I fail to understand the cutting of scenes in some films, take Bruce Lee's films the major cut scenes consist of Nunchaka's, now the reason for the cut's is apparently, someone was killed with these so they banned them in films!? Well in the nineties several people have died at the hands of an Uzi, yet they still appear in loads of movies (strange?? I think more like politics).

While neither of these informants go into much detail, they share Pitter's attitude of skepticism regarding both the need to censor and the motives behind censorship. Such an attitude is reflected in numerous informant comments about "violence" in the films. Hayward, for instance, implies an anti-censorship stance when he writes that 'violence' in martial arts films

does not bother me really. I feel this is because violence if we like it or not is part of all our lives and should not be dismissed and considered a 'taboo' subject,

while another informant says ‘it’s crazy the way they cut scenes – I don’t see, y’know, why do that? What’s it gonna achieve, realistically?’ (Riley), and another says ‘censorship is stupid, though – we need to worry about *real* violence, not films’ (A. Morley).

WHAT ATTITUDES OR VALUES DO MARTIAL ARTS ACTION FILMS PROMOTE?

The notion that attitudes and values promoted vary from film to film is prevalent amongst informants who identify themselves as watchers and/or fans of martial arts action cinema, while non-watchers tend to see attitudes and values promoted by the films as more unified and more negative. No informant, I should add, queries the term “promoted” in the question; although many informants were not happy with talking about the “effects” of films, all seem to accept that films can be said to promote attitudes about what they represent, as well as to promote certain values, as a number of informants make quite clear in their responses.

The following non-watchers respond to my question about what attitudes are promoted in these ways: ‘It’s all about violence’ (Pesek); ‘Violent, vigilante attitudes – the hero is always in a violent role’ (Anon. #1); ‘aggressiveness is promoted – using martial arts to attack’ (Cowen); and ‘violence solves all problems is what they say’ (Rachel). At the same time, some informants who dislike and avoid watching martial arts films because of their “violence” don’t seem to regard them as potentially harmful or even influential, remarking ‘it’s – they’re just *movies*, so I don’t think they promote anything much’ (Anon. #3), and ‘I don’t think people see [the] films as anything more than entertainment. If they do then they already have problems’ (Gahn).

Other informants seem uncertain about the influence of films, and/or uneasy about attributing any influence to them. Melissa Purdue, for instance, writes that ‘I don’t really come out of those shows feeling they’d portrayed many worthy values,’ while Tielking responds with the suggestion that ‘They *probably* promote the idea that the point of practicing a martial art is to be able to beat people up’⁶ (my emphasis). Also, Mendoza seems to be unwilling to suggest that martial arts films effect children directly, but *is* concerned enough about their influence more generally when she says she discourages her own children from watching martial arts action films because ‘I really don’t want them thinking that kicking and hitting and hurting other people is a good way to deal with a conflict.’

⁶ The whole of the response that follows this is reproduced earlier in this chapter.

Others insist that the response to questions about attitudes and values depends on individual films. Mueller, for instance, writes that

I think that most films portray martial arts as an offensive (in both senses) activity (i.e., go out and kick someone's ass). But occasionally, as in the three films I mentioned [*The Karate Kid*, *The Last Dragon*, *The Perfect Weapon*], you find the idea that martial arts are noble arts that must be respected and treated with their own due reverence.

When responding to a similar question about Van Damme's films, though, the same informant writes that:

Some promote good martial arts attitudes of discipline, hard work, patience, and playing the mental game (PMA). Most, since *Cyborg*, promote sex, violence, and the idea that, if you have a German accent, you can make a film (Mueller).

This kind of ambivalence about what exactly the films promote is evident in many responses. Norpel, for instance, points out that 'Most films have "good guys" and "bad guys," and the bad guys usually are more glamorous but the good guys win in the end,' but adds that 'I believe most martial arts films give most people an aggressive attitude.' And when talking about Van Damme's films he writes:

Some of his films do promote good values. Such values include never giving up, honor, respect and self-control. Some of his films promote strong family values. But an attitude that also shows up is revenge. As in many martial arts films, the lead star gets revenge for a friend or family member's death or injury (Norpel).

Still other informants, though, feel that positive attitudes and values are often promoted by the films, although they are aware of the criticisms made of them – as Bormet makes clear in his response:

Well, the films are violent and action oriented, but at the same time I don't believe they promote any sort of violence. Do they promote good values? The hero is usually the "good guy" so he is the person we root for. This means he's normally on the side of justice (which is supposed to be a good thing).

Others who share Bormet's general position here say, for instance:

I think a lot of what they promote is positive, good values. The hero oftentimes helps out people, y'know, who have problems or whatever. And also the star actor only fights - only defends himself, at least in the films I've watched (Riley);

that:

the values they promote are good – they defend their families and friends, you know – or like with, with Steven Seagal he also helps

the environment. And yeah, it's a little hokey, but it's trying to be good, you know. And I think – I see them as promoting the idea that you should work hard to be a good martial artist, except some of the really gory ones, I guess (Anon #5);

as well as that:

The impression of family and friends I get from [Van Damme's] films is quite clear – always stick by them (Doyle);

and that in many martial arts action films:

violence is seen as a short-term solution to certain problems which cannot be resolved without violence. A state of non-violence is the ideal goal to be achieved (V. Phillips).

In addition, Roberts says 'Actually I don't care because they are fun to watch,' while another informant says 'I don't know if they promote certain values or not – it doesn't really bother, or really occur to me when I watch them' (Greg).

Shawn suggests that it is the watcher's perspective that affects what attitudes are promoted by martial arts action films, responding:

Shawn: It depends on what level you look at it – whether you look at it on the level that well, he's doing these extreme things, but he's doing them for a reason.

SH: Reason?

Shawn: He's doing them to help people and it's always good to be good to people, and you can help them – even if it entails beating someone else to a bloody pulp – but you're still being good because you're helping that person.

So while there is no clear agreement amongst informants about the "effects" martial arts action films might or might not have, or about the types of attitudes and values they might or might not promote, individual informants do express an interest in as well as a response to such issues when I raise them. In general, it is non-watchers who think that martial arts films "effect" people – especially children – in negative ways, while those who watch the films tend to be more ambivalent, or even to think that positive, "good" values and attitudes are promoted and might influence those who watch the films.

MARTIAL ARTS ACTION CINEMA & "REALISM"

While many informants seem concerned that martial arts action films do not present martial arts "realistically," or have "realistic" plots, some informants are not at all concerned, insisting for instance that 'they're just movies – just stories, so who cares,

y'know?' (Anon #4). And while Ashton is committed to ensuring that real-life martial arts practitioners learn about 'things like courtesy, integrity, perseverance' as well as form and technique, when I ask if he cares that inaccurate impressions of martial arts might be formed from watching martial arts films, he answers:

No. I think no, just like any – police movies don't give an accurate portrayal of policemen. They don't spend 90% of their time going around getting shot at and shooting people - they probably spend 90% of their time doing bookwork.

Other informants seem equally unfazed by what they perceive as inaccurate representations of martial arts and martial artists, although they do comment on the phenomenon. Cebula, for instance, says that real-life martial artists are nothing like as aggressive as those represented in many martial arts films, adding that:

I can imagine like in our own club – I mean if some guy ran through here with a gun I don't think anybody would attack him – I like to joke about it, but I mean I'm never going to go over to the aikido class and try to take them on. No, it's very friendly, actually. I've never met anybody in martial arts who's wanted to get in a fight - it's kind of an odd thing I guess. But I'd say martial artists don't go round picking fights, typically – but there's always the bad egg.

Similarly, another informant says that 'real fighters aren't as – they don't attack people on the street, y'know, like on the movies' (Mike), and his fellow interviewee agrees, saying 'yeah, that's ridiculous. I mean I fight, I make money from it – but I'm not, I don't get like that outside of it – that's not the discipline' (Greg).

However, many informants *are* concerned about issues of realism in martial arts action cinema, whether in relation to actors' martial arts expertise or in relation to whether or not the plots are "realistic." I have already presented a number of informant responses to issues of how "realistically" martial arts are portrayed in martial arts action cinema in earlier sections of this chapter dealing with the representation of martial arts and with martial arts film plots. Here, I focus on two other areas of pertinence to the question of "realism" – whether martial arts film stars are genuinely talented at martial arts and if that matters, and what is considered a "realistic" film by informants.

ARE MARTIAL ARTS FILM STARS REALLY TALENTED AT MARTIAL ARTS?

Informants' responses to the questions "Do you think martial arts film stars are genuinely talented at martial arts?" and "What do you think about this?" were fairly varied, and often involved references to particular martial arts film stars. A lot of informants feel that all or many martial arts film stars are talented, and while many of them say this either adds to or is essential to their enjoyment of the films, others do not

mind so long as what is on screen *looks* good. Equally, a number of informants feel the stars of martial arts action cinema are *not* talented martial artists; again, some feel this undermines their enjoyment of the films, while others do not mind. Different informants have different ideas about what constitutes genuine talent, though, and while some feel that a martial arts film star should be a good *fighter* to be classed as a genuinely talented martial artist, others feel that s/he need only be athletic and technically proficient. Whatever individual informants say, though, the issue of whether the martial arts represented in films are “realistic” or not – and whether the stars can “really” do martial arts – is regarded as important by a lot of participant-informants, and especially those who also practice martial arts.

Tielking expresses the difficulty he experiences in telling the difference between martial arts actors who are genuinely talented and those who are not, writing:

Some of them probably are – according to all reports, Bruce Lee was genuinely talented. Some probably aren't. I read somewhere that Brigitte Lin doesn't know martial arts – it said that she just waves her hands, smiles enigmatically, and lets a stuntwoman do the hard stuff. I never knew that, and I guess I couldn't easily confirm it. I probably can't tell from what I see on screen who is doing the real thing and who isn't.

He then implies that he doesn't particularly care whether or not martial arts actors are talented or not – on the grounds that what they do is ‘pretend’ anyway. Instead he points out the *practical* advantages of actors being able to perform their own moves:

Of course what they do in front of the camera is no more martial arts than it is combat – it's pretend martial arts (and pretend combat). But some of the actors and actresses probably have martial arts skills which come in handy during shooting (Tielking).

Other informants also express the view that some stars are probably proficient in martial arts while others are not, and that ultimately they do not mind too much so long as what is on the screen doesn't *look* fake. Waldbusser, for instance, says:

SW: I think there might be some people that are really good at martial arts and that could be the only reason they're actually in a movie, and at the same time you might get a movie that's a little bit better quality – an actor who's a better actor, but at the same time his martial arts skills aren't as good and then they'll put a double in there, but...

SH: Do you mind if they do that?

SW: I guess I don't mind if I know it's fictional – it's always nice when the actual person does the actual stuff that they've trained for three months or whatever to do, like one stunt. Um, it only really bothers me if you can tell – and this goes with any movie – if there's a definite, where you see a person's face in one scene, and there's something else in

the other, it's totally different – they're trying to mask it, that's the only thing that bothers me.

Along similar lines, Pitter says when I ask, “Do you care whether they can really do it or not?”: ‘Listen, as long as I can’t tell it’s a stunt, though, then that’s fine. I mean too often you can tell it’s a stunt,’ and Mike says ‘I only care if it *looks* like they can’t do it – y’know, if it’s a double and you, you can see that it’s a double.’ However, both these informants indicate clearly that while they do not necessarily care whether performers can “really do it” or not, they admire those who *can*. This is evident when Mike adds that ‘It’s better if they’re – if it’s not a double. I have more, like, respect for someone when, who does his own stunts,’ and in the rest of Pitter’s response:

- JP: ...If at a later stage you find out that they’ve done it themselves, then I do have more respect – for the film and for them.
- SH: Uh-huh, right.
- JP: But if it looks real enough that’s – that’s good enough, whilst you’re watching. If subsequently you’re watching again and find out, you know, they’ve done it themselves – I mean, their performance as an actor or actress, you’re more impressed. And, I like that...

This attitude is widespread amongst informants who watch martial arts action films, as well as amongst some non-watchers; it is evidenced perhaps most clearly by the fact that Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan are held in such high regard precisely because they are widely held to do their own stunts and choreography, and, at least in Lee’s case, are also purported to be excellent fighters.

Despite earlier comments suggesting he cannot tell which performers are genuinely talented and which are not, Tielking clarifies that this does not necessarily mean he does not care whether they are genuinely talented or not:

It seems somehow dishonest to do martial arts on screen if you’re not good at it at all, but I’m not sure why I think that - I certainly don’t think Harrison Ford is dishonest if he can’t pilot a starship or even shoot straight. And I know that some of the martial arts we see on screen is impossible – like a man taking repeated heavy blows to the head and still fighting, or leaping nine feet into the air for a flying kick, or whatever (Tielking).

Interestingly, an informant with a rather different view of things also chooses Harrison Ford to illustrate his point: When I ask if he cares whether martial arts film stars are genuinely talented or not, he says ‘I absolutely care,’ and goes on to say he admires Jackie Chan so much not simply because of how good his films look but because ‘he gives up a lot to make those movies – like sections of his skull’ (John). He goes on to talk about a range of martial arts stars, saying ‘[s]ome of them are talented, some of

them are hacks – I mean pretty bad,’ then refers back to the earlier comment he made in response to my initial question of “Do you like action films?”:

I like action films – I like them a lot. But I – I think it was Harrison Ford - he says he does his own stunts because movement, because action is part of character, a part of personality, a part of emotion... so they gotta be *good*.

Here, John identifies an aspect of acting/filmmaking that does indeed seem to be important to a great many martial arts action film watchers – many of whom say that martial arts actors have to be genuinely talented for them to really enjoy the films they are in (although fewer of them address the issue Tielking raises about the difficulty in establishing who’s doing their own moves and who is not).

The following responses indicate the extent to which informants feel martial arts stars are and/or should be genuinely talented at martial arts: Roberts writes:

Yes, I think most are. They pretty much have to be or the audience won’t watch it. If they just try to do the kicks and don’t have the technique or speed, it’s not fun to watch – unless you want humor! If it’s a martial arts film, someone who practices the sport should be in it, not someone acting like they do;

while Barnes says:

Yes, they have to be. Well, they have the technique, obviously, or they wouldn’t be able to do it, period. As far as fighting situations go, that’s hard to say. It’d take a lot away from it – you need to know they’re good at what they’re doing even though it’s choreographed;

another answers:

well I guess some of them are – I’m not sure they all are, and that’s - that’s not good, y’know. It makes me mad when I know some guy’s – when he looks bad, or like he has a double. I don’t think it makes the martial arts look good (Anon #5);

and Clancy says ‘Yes. Yes, for me it makes a big difference’ before going on to outline his views about the talents of individual martial arts film stars. Also, Fischer and Muller think that most stars are genuinely talented, responding to my question thus:

JM: I think yes, that most of them – the things you see them doing aren’t necessarily what I have experience in so it’s hard to judge, but – It *looks* right, powerful and stuff. But I think they rely heavily on that, and I don’t think there’s a whole lot of acting going on.

SF: I definitely think that the ones in good movies do train very heavily. I read an article about a woman in *The Karate Kid* – she went from three hours a day to six or seven hours a day training, and she was actually pretty good at what she did. I don’t know if she actually got her belts, but she worked up to that level where she could actually do big

kicks well.
JM: I've seen clips of – about Jackie Chan, and *he's* very talented. He does all his own stunts and stuff, and he's funny.

The importance of stars actually being talented at martial arts in order to attract film experiencers to watch them is also made clear by a number of informant responses and remarks. And even some of those who dislike martial arts films as a rule respond to the question of whether they think martial arts stars are genuinely talented or not by saying that 'Yes, most of them. That is the only thing I respect about them' (Gahn); 'well yeah, I can respect them from an athletic point of view' (Mendoza); 'I respect them for getting that fit – that, like, flexible' (Christine); or 'It would make it more credible – I would be more inclined to watch a movie that did showcase real talent rather than stunts and tricks and camera angles' (Pesek).

Other informants share similar views, but are less insistent that martial arts stars be especially talented, stressing rather that it is *preferable* rather than *necessary* that they are. They say, for instance:

It's nice if – you know, if it's their acting. Like Jackie Chan, Michelle Yeoh, you know it's their own acting – and some of the stunts, y'know, you can say, wow, that was well done... I think they [US stars] are pretty good. I don't think they're the best. I just think – they're good, they're better than most people (McKim);

and:

MM: Well, I mean most of the big names probably are – it's been said that Bruce Lee was the best martial artist there ever was, but I don't know that for sure. But I don't know about some of the lesser-known kung-fu stars... I watched when I was a kid. I suppose they probably know martial arts to be able to choreograph the fight scenes, but I'm sure some of them don't know martial arts at all.

SH: Do you care?

MM: If it's obvious to me, it seems really dumb to me, but it's okay if it looks good (Morris).

In these responses, informants suggest that film experiencers *can* tell if stars are talented or not by what they see on screen; they also challenge Tielking's notion that Harrison Ford's inability to 'pilot a spaceship or even shoot straight' is equivalent to a martial arts star who is not genuinely able to perform martial arts moves – echoing instead John's suggestion that movement and action are part of character and personality. And some informants insist that film experiencers should care – and can *tell* - whether or not the actors are doing their own moves or not. Mueller, for instance, writes that:

It takes a great deal of training to not simply know how to hurt someone, but to how not to hurt someone (especially yourself) when filming those fight sequences. In fact, it takes more mental training than physical training to pull it all off without injury. So, I think in general that a lot of those stars aren't given the credit they really deserve.

At the same time, other informants are more skeptical – one pointing out, for instance, that while

it is nice if I know the actor is a legitimate martial artist, even now, Bruce Lee is the ultimate fighter, he er – it's hard to tell by his movies. His fight scenes aren't great. In a movie, anyone can look like a good fighter (Luke).

Cebula articulates the differences he feels exist between different ages and nationalities of martial arts stars, although making clear that all of the ones he mentions have some degree of talent precisely because 'not just anybody' can do what is done in martial arts films:

- JC: In the Hong Kong films, Jackie Chan's generation of stars, they were trained really heavily. I mean they're doing stunts - they're fake, they're set up, but not just anybody can get up and do that... nobody dies making these films, and I can't believe it. I got a lot of respect for the people that make those films.
- SH: What about in America?
- JC: In America they go to great lengths to avoid doing those things – in my opinion, it's usually a barely decent actor comes along and somebody finds out that they knew martial arts and wham, he becomes a big action star. So, like a guy like Van Damme – I mean he couldn't get a job acting until he did some big kicks for a producer – and they're like, *Bloodsport*. I dunno, I guess it helps out a lot for some of these guys to get jobs, because they can't act otherwise. Guys like Don "the Dragon" Wilson who can't act, and Mark Dacascos, he's a staple of Showtime, and he has no acting ability whatsoever, but the guy knows karate.
- SH: What do you think about using stunt doubles?
- JC: I think the way they portray the martial arts is not right in the first place most of the time, y'know – it's not honest enough, so it doesn't really matter – I guess I would rather see some really good martial arts movies, some people to portray them – I dunno, maybe more realistically, or just, to a more interesting degree than – I dunno, you can't say that Steven Seagal's a good actor, but I love watching him fight.
- SH: Where do you find out about stars' training and..?
- JC: Rumors you pick up – I mean I didn't exactly go research Jean-Claude Van Damme, but I know about him from – I mean I've seen him in many of his films, and you know, he's good in the films, I mean he's good – I don't know what he's like in real life. But it's not fair to judge anybody's martial arts by their movies.

In contrast, other informants – again mainly those who watch and enjoy the films – simply state that martial arts stars are genuinely talented at martial arts because they have to be, and because their talent so often does *not* lie in acting *per se*. Norple, for instance, responds to my question thus:

Yes. Most of these stars are not looked at for their acting ability. If they are beautiful and can throw a spinning kick, they are probably in a film. Anyone – no matter how good they can act – can end up in movies. Especially on HBO and other cable networks,

while other informants' experiences as tournament informants in kickboxing and tae kwon do lend support to such claims:

The problem they have is it's hard to find somebody who can fight really well, and act – decently. Because any time you go to like a big tournament there's always people there and they're like 'hey, you wanna be in a movie?' and it's like 'no.' That's how a lot of people get their breaks – they go to a national tournament, an international tournament, y'know (Aitchison).

Yeah, I've been asked to be in a movie – and like that's crazy, I - I can't act – I can hardly talk in, like, in real life. But they ask, y'know, because, if you can fight well they ask. You don't even need to, to look hot, y'know? (Anon. #5).

In addition, many informants – whatever their views about the talent of particular stars – are well aware that publicists are invested in making them believe the stars are talented. Waldbusser says of Van Damme, for instance:

...if you go by what he or what his publicists or whatever say, he er, actually won a European karate title, so many years ago. Then other people say he didn't, and – I think if you watch the movies, whether he is good in real life fighting or not, he has some skill, like especially for the flexibility – he does excellent stretching stuff, but - I don't know if that translates into good fighting skill. I heard he got the crap kicked out of him in New York a few years ago at a bar.

Other informants have clearly read or heard some of Van Damme's publicity, and this is what they have to say about him as a result of that and/or their own experience of his films:

I think he's probably a good athlete, but I don't know if he would be so terrific in an actual fight with a karate or tae kwon do expert. I thought I'd read somewhere that he was Belgian national champion in something – like full contact kickboxing or something like that. But I'm not so sure it's true (Morris);

and:

with Jean-Claude Van Damme in particular there's the whole – he

had claimed to be a European karate champion - and he fought under a different name, and - I mean as I watch him he can do - I mean physically he can do the splits, and he's muscular - I can see why people liked watching him, that's why I liked him originally. The amazing kicking appealed to me. But I don't know if he can fight (Luke);

as well as:

I would say yes [he's talented], he has to be to make those kinds of films - but as far as competition standards - I wouldn't know (Barnes).

Clancy also has a lot to say about the talents of Van Damme as compared to other martial arts stars, having asserted early on that it's important to him that martial arts stars should have good martial arts abilities even if they're not great fighters:

BC: I know a little bit about the training of, like, what Jackie Chan's gone through and who he's worked with and where he got his training - and I know a little bit about the background of Van Damme - and there's some falsehood when it comes to Van Damme. He earned his black belt in shokotan, which is mostly a punching style - their number one thing is the reverse punch - and he, according to what I've read - his original name was, like, Van Varenberg and he did very well in tournaments in Europe, but they weren't kickboxing tournaments, they were point tournaments - kinda like the tournaments we have here for the martial arts that wear uniforms. And they - he was very good at them obviously, because he has good kicks and flexibility, but he sort of played himself off as a real kickboxer.

SH: Yeah, I've read he was the Belgian kickboxing champion.

BC: Right, but he - Don Wilson called him on that - and Don is, as you know, Don is a very experienced fighter and he's a good kickboxer - he started out in traditional martial arts - and Don called him on it and asked him if he wanted to have a celebrity bout, and Van Damme turned him down. It was a couple years ago, I think actually the backlash from it made Don Wilson look worse - at least that's the way most magazines played it off, because most people thought 'Oh, Van Damme's the new star and you're feeling bad' - I think he just wanted to fight him because - Wilson's never lost. He's actually the only person who's ever beat the current American kickboxing champion - who was in *Kickboxer* with Van Damme, very cocky. Wilson's the only person who's ever beaten him.

SH: Uh-huh. He is.

BC: But Van Damme, he's not a real kickboxer or a fighter, but he's a very talented kicker - and his mechanics for his kicks and his flexibility are obviously - when the camera zooms away from him and you see his whole body, he does the whole kick. That's impressive.

As in these comments about Van Damme, many informants apparently agree that while not all martial arts stars are especially talented at martial arts,

I like all these stars because of the physical ability, they all can fight, kick high or do jumping kicks or multiple kicks and some do acrobatics. So with all these things combined they look good to watch by my opinion. Even though in a real life situation none of it would really work (Gardner).

A prevalent belief, then, is that 'I think that most – they have to be very athletic and gymnastic, at least' (Hayes), that martial arts film stars 'definitely have to be great athletes – really good' (Sally), and that this in itself is worth admiration and 'respect,' whether or not such skills translate into good martial arts or fighting skills *per se*.

TRUE STORIES

Another aspect of "realism" admired by martial arts action film watchers is its use of so-called true life stories. As I mention above, a prevalent attitude is that films based on "true" stories – especially those, such as *Bloodsport*, which are based on the life story of a martial artist – are far superior to films with entirely fictional plots. Barnes, for instance, says *Bloodsport* 'was good - it was based on a true story, too. That makes a movie better, I think – well, it can,' adding when I ask him "Why is that?", 'it's more believable, obviously – although there's various arts of directorial freedom that they take.' Also, Riley says 'I enjoy – I like movies about real people, real stories – So I like *Bloodsport* and the Bruce Lee life story movie;' another informant says 'I enjoy – that the movies based on real events I like, then they make more sense and have – they interest me more' (Anon. #4); while Waldbusser says of Van Damme's films:

The earlier ones were just like - real life, like some of them were actually based on true stories and then – I think that's always more interesting, when you see something like that that's based on something that actually happened.

When I ask him to name the films he thinks are more like "real life," Waldbusser says:

Yeah – *Bloodsport* – that was a really good movie, in terms of martial arts movies. That and *Kickboxer* was a good movie. They just – they just seemed more realistic and more, I dunno – not stupid. That's not a very intelligent way of saying it, but they were just – not boring.

INFORMANT RESPONSES & ISSUES OF RACE & GENDER

Although I rarely ask informants what they think about the representations of race or gender in martial arts action cinema, a few informants brought up the issues

themselves. In this section, I outline what informants said about the representation of race and gender in martial arts action films, where the brevity of the section reflects the comparatively small number of informants who commented on such issues.

Aitchison stresses that while Asians and other non-whites are regularly the “bad guys” who are beaten in martial arts action films, ‘I don’t think it’s deliberately done to make other countries look bad, but y’know...’ Explaining this, he adds

Usually the reason that they’re always beating up on the non-white people is because they want to find people who look good on screen who can fight really good that don’t want a big pay check – and usually that’s the guy from Japan, or the guy from wherever – you know, Brazil, and it’s not the big star.

Similarly, McKim says:

I mean I don’t necessarily think it’s racial, I mean – whites beating up Asians, it’s more – the white guy wins because he’s the one who’s got the name, the one who is a star. He’s the one who’s got to win. And I don’t know – necessarily who he’s gonna beat, but there’s a good chance he’s gonna be Asian, because that’s who most of the other people are.

Other informants are less convinced that the racial representations of martial arts action films are so innocent. Waldbussser, for instance, says that:

I don’t know how fair all the types of representation is – a lot of times it seems like, and I think this is the way with all American cinema, like America good – and whatever other country that we want, they’re gonna be bad. No matter if they’re – yes, a lot of times I don’t think the Asian countries are treated as fairly because they’ll have – say, an American, and I don’t know if you can call this treated unfairly, but you – you’ll have a movie made in America and the star’ll be American and then – he’ll just beat the crap out of everyone, and it can be like a Korean master and a Japanese master and he’ll just go through them all like they’re all nothing – when in real life it’s nowhere near that. But I think it is getting better. I think Bruce Lee was well portrayed..... and now, a lot of Jackie Chan’s movies are being, er, promoted much more in America and are being made in America and I think it’s more acceptable now than it was.

Also, Crisman says that ‘In America at least, there’s a certain amount of racism, so the hero is better white – for the average American beer-drinker to identify, to watch an Asian guy do it it’s not so easy to identify,’ also commenting that ‘Bruce Lee was in *The Green Hornet* and he had to wear that mask because he was Asian.’ In addition, Cebula points out that:

it’s very hard to find a bad Chinese person, like in an action film, that doesn’t know the martial arts. I mean, even like just people that meet on the street in an action film – so yeah, there’s a lot of

stereotyping going on there,

clarifying his point by asserting later that ‘anyone who’s Asian obviously knows a martial art - that’s the whole stereotype.’

Pitter expresses exasperation at the ways in which Black characters in action films tend to end up dead or wounded, and also that central protagonists are still usually white. In relation to martial arts action films in particular, he criticizes those in which

- JP: you come across quite a few and you get some American kid or some English kid who learns martial arts over the course of six months...
- SH: Right!
- JP: ... and will go beat up the master of that particular style. You know, I don’t like those films ... y’know I have no time for them. They’re typical of that certain type of Western film where – the Western world masters everything, is the best for everything and I think it, you know, it’s just a ploy to keep Western audiences happy. To make them believe one of their own is number one, and I guess it just keeps them happy in watching the films – in which they are the hero...

Here, Pitter points to the Western-biased racism of certain films which might explain in large part his self-identification as a film experienter who enjoys Chinese and Hong Kong-produced rather than Hollywood martial arts action films. In addition, he says ‘I wish there was more accurate information about it [martial arts]’ in the press. He suggests this would be beneficial because it would give people ‘a better understanding of what it’s all about,’ so they would not see it as especially violent, and would not ‘assum[e] that every Chinese person they see is a master in some martial art’ – another aspect of US martial arts action films that troubles Pitter.

The only other informant to really talk about what she sees as the racism of martial arts and other action films, though, is also unfortunately an informant whose taped interview is largely impossible to transcribe. However, one comment she makes is as follows:

These films - action films generally, they can be very racist, and they often are. I think – I think Black men are poorly shown... [unclear]... I mean they’re often in the films, but they’re sidelined. ... [unclear]... And the way they deal with people from countries where the martial arts originate – that’s very racist. They treat them like they’re stupid, and like being white is enough to make you a better fighter (Anon #2).

This informant is also quite vocal about the poor representation of women in martial arts and other action films, although again much of what she has to say has not been

transcribed. As few informants comment on the representation of women in martial arts action films as comment on race, although far more is said about gender than race when commenting on who *watches* them.

Aitchison says he thinks it would be 'better' to have more women in martial arts films, because 'the women's fights are usually better than the men's... they're always more exciting,' but shares the consensus opinion that

there's usually not many women in martial arts films. There's usually one woman who's – and she's not the main character she's the secondary character and – I don't know if she's necessarily the weak person – she might be a martial artist, but erm – usually there's very few. They do some martial arts and that's it – or they get rescued. Usually it's twenty, thirty men and they fight it out (McKim),

Or, as Crisman says:

Jackie Chan's got a female partner, I guess – I don't know her name but - he shows like positive role models. But usually – like Seagal or Jean-Claude might be out to protect the farm wife or something - there's one like that, with Jean-Claude – where he's got to protect the woman from – I dunno. It's kind of the maiden to rescue from the dragon stereotype.

When I ask Crook what she thinks about women's roles in martial arts action films, she says:

Women's roles tend to be more – er, victims, like in Jackie Chan films too ... torn up by the bad guys – like in the Bruce Lee movies where the woman kills herself because these guys are after her and that kind of stuff. The guys are the hero and the girls are the victims. Although there are some exceptions now.

Echoing this last point, Waldbusser says that

I think they've gotten a lot better ... Now there's – there's enough really good female martial artists that they actually have their own movies. I mean you see that if you go to – depending on the video stores you go to, you can actually see that.

What Waldbusser does not acknowledge here, though, is what another informant points out:

Yeah, there are women in them – there are some martial arts film stars that are women. But you never see them at the cinema, and - so, how many people you think know who Cynthia Rothrock is?' (Anon #2).

The same informant complains that often women are just in martial arts and other action films 'just so people don't think the hero's gay,' because 'they don't do anything else with the women, with the fact that they're women' (Anon #2). This point is

especially significant given that very few informants could remember the names of female martial arts film stars or performers, and that Cynthia Rothrock is the *only one* mentioned by name by more than one participant-informant.

COMMENTS ON INTERNET SOURCES OF MARTIAL ARTS FILM EXPERIENCERS

In addition to interviewing research participants and receiving letters and questionnaires from them, I read watcher reviews of a number of “core” martial arts action films appearing on Internet sites.

While many such reviews are similar to the ‘capsule’ reviews of professional critics in style and length, overall they are either more favourable about the films or more specific about why the reviewer is not positive about the film in question. So for instance, many negative Internet reviews would trash an individual film but express surprise since they usually enjoy the genre and/or star they are reviewing. This contrasts with most professional reviews, which are inclined to identify “good” martial arts action films as the exception rather than the rule for the genre.

Also, Internet reviews tend to focus less on plot and more on other aspects of martial arts action cinema – such as their pace, their entertainment value, and the quality and quantity of their martial arts sequences. Such foci have more in common with informants who identify as martial arts action film fans and/or watchers than with critics’ and theorists’ commentaries or with non-watcher informants.

These are very general points that struck me from reading Internet reviews after carrying out my research with participant-informants and reading numerous professional reviews. Such points would clearly benefit from considerable elaboration and development, but the constraints of this format mean I am unable to do that here.

Despite the preliminary, undeveloped nature of my comments here, I still think it well worth mentioning the Internet reviews and their use-value for the kind of project I am carrying out. From a methodological point of view, I would argue that Internet sources provide an extremely useful means of “testing” research findings and hypotheses about film experiencers: They provide, after all, watcher responses to and evaluations of films that are not shaped or guided in any way by the researcher’s questions or other research tools or processes.

Internet sources such as watcher reviews also provide a great source of data for theorists and critics interested in actual watcher responses but unable (or unwilling) to spend the time and effort required to set up and carry out interviews, elicit letters, and so forth. Also, I think the sites on which watcher reviews appear present possible sites of study for ethnographic work on CofPs – at least where the sites are frequented by the same people over time.

All these ways of using the Internet might be implemented in future studies of film experiencers, although methodological and epistemological issues would need to be ironed out as with any research process. Certainly a discussion of Internet reviews of martial arts action films would have supported the notion that informants in my research shared a number of ideas and assumptions, likes and dislikes, with martial arts film watchers *not* participant in my research project. Being able to illustrate that might well help support my findings and any extrapolations I make about martial arts action films; it would also “flesh out” my illustrative examples considerably. However, since Internet reviewers rarely provide personal information (such as age, gender, race), it would be extremely hard to use such data to theorize about the significance of watchers’ socioeconomic identities and positions.

PART IV:
FINAL HYPOTHESES & CONCLUSIONS

One is left with more to pay attention to rather than less

- Robert E. Stake

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS & HYPOTHESES ABOUT MARTIAL ARTS ACTION CINEMA, FILM EXPERIENCERS, & FILM STUDIES

Some of the conclusions and hypotheses I present in this chapter are necessarily tentative and contingent, not least because they rest on the input of just sixty-seven film experiencers who refer to a sometimes different range of films and stars when talking or writing about “martial arts action cinema.” Others, though, are less tentative – especially those concerned with ways in which theorists and critics can learn from film experiencers, and how ethnography might be utilized to that end – even though they too rest in significant part on the input of research informants.

The extrapolations from the case study I set out below do not make any claims about film experiencers not participant in the case study; they concern the words of those people who *did* participate. However, the material from the case study does suggest that a number and range of experiences of these films have not been fully recognized or accounted for by film theorists, critics or other cultural commentators – something about which I comment in the same section. Following the section extrapolating from the case study, I set out some concluding hypotheses about ethnography’s potential place in film experienter work.

In the latter sections of this chapter I move to consider more general issues about “citing the viewer” in film theory and criticism, focusing on the deeply problematic use of conceptual identity categories (such as “Black” and “female”) and the generalizations involved. I reiterate that I do not believe valid conclusions can be drawn about martial arts action film experiencers (or other film experiencers) identified as part of such conceptual “groups.”

Then, in contrast, I set out the areas in which I do think useful conclusions and working hypotheses can be drawn about film experiencers participant n my case study and similar projects. I conclude that such work is potentially most valuable insofar as it can “narrow the gap” between film experiencers and those who theorize, critique and/or seek to control their experiences of film.

ASPECTS OF EXPERIENCE

As I indicate in Chapter 4, one way I developed to refer to, make sense of and discuss experiences of martial arts action cinema is to abstract categories, or “aspects” of experience from informant responses. Through breaking down and identifying different and particular ways in which people identify and/or inhabit their positions or perspectives vis-à-vis the cinema; express or imply their attitudes to it; and as what they experience the cinema; I can show that experiences of the cinema cover far more ground than that assumed and implied by most film theorists and critics as well as other commentators and policy makers (such as those who classify and/or censor martial arts action films for UK release). This in itself is a crucial result of this project, as it was of course motivated by my own skepticism as to the accuracy of the ways in which martial arts action film “viewers” – and/as their experiences of the films – are regularly treated and/or characterized by film critics, theorists and others.

While I separate out these aspects of experience for purposes of illustrative and theoretical clarity, all these aspects intersect and interact within individual and groups of experiencers to shape (and sometimes confuse) opinions about martial arts action cinema, and the pleasures and meanings film experiencers take from it (or not). Of course neither all possible and actualized aspects of experience, nor all possible combinations of them are captured in this study – not least because it’s the work of only one author interacting with only sixty-seven informants. However, the aspects of experience I do name and discuss are significant in the words of many informants, and do at least indicate a range of areas to keep in mind when researching and theorizing film experiencers.

Perspectives of Experience

What I term perspectives of experience refers to the theoretical location, site or position from which a film experiencer experiences martial arts action cinema. This position might or might not coincide with that from which s/he experiences films from another genre, or might be particular to his/her experience of martial arts films.

I found that martial arts action cinema is most often experienced by informants as being from the perspective of:

- a martial arts practitioner
- an action film watcher/fan

- a martial arts action film watcher/fan
- a fan of a particular martial arts action film star
- a non-watcher of martial arts action films
- a non-watcher of action films

and sometimes from the perspective of:

- their gender or other socio-political identity
- an occasional watcher of martial arts action films
- an accidental and/or segment watcher of martial arts action films

Given that (to my knowledge) thirty-three of the sixty-seven participants in my research either practice or have practiced martial arts, it is perhaps unsurprising that many of them identify their perspectives of experience in terms of their relationship to martial arts (whether or not they practice) as well as in terms of their relationship to the genre (for example, whether or not they consider themselves a “fan” of the films and/or a particular star) and to the action film genre more generally. As Chapter 4 reveals, only sometimes do some informants identify their socio-political identity as pertinent, even though film theorists and critics often use such categorizations to identify (and caricature) “audiences.” At the same time, while informants rarely point to their *own* gender, sexuality or racial identity as pertinent to their perspective of experience, they frequently identify the gender of *others* as a pertinent or even defining factor, and sometimes identify sexual orientation or race as pertinent factors also.

Again, it is perhaps unsurprising that gender identity is picked out as a significant element of a film experiencer’s perspective of experience on martial arts and other action cinema in a culture where one’s identity as “male” or “female” is so regularly used to explain, define or predict one’s interests and pleasures. My research suggests, though, that making generalizations about an individual’s likes and dislikes on the basis of their gender is not reliable, since many female informants watch and enjoy martial arts films, while many male informants dislike and/or do not watch and enjoy them. However, my research also suggests that more female than male film experiencers assume *a priori* that they will not enjoy martial arts action films (and/or other action films) either because they are female or – via an equivalent social expectation – because they do not enjoy watching “violence” (widely defined as a male pleasure by our culture, as evidenced by the comments and assumptions of many informants as well as theorists and critics).

Given the number and degree of challenges to perceived norms of gendered watching evident not only in my but in others' studies of film experiencers, though, I think the relationship between the gender identity of *actual* film experiencers and the experiences they have of films needs to be explored more fully and more fluidly than spectatorship studies allow for. This is because hypothetical theories of spectatorship fail to address adequately the lived realities of how and how far film experiencers are actually categorized and contained by gender categories. That is – as I reiterate below – while much productive feminist work can be done by identifying and criticizing what “woman” is and means *in film*, nothing similar is to be gained from attempting to identify and analyze “women” watchers – precisely because this threatens to be as restrictive and delimiting of (real) women as are the filmic representations of “woman” under critical analysis.

Attitudes to Experience

As the name suggests, “attitudes to experience” refer to the attitudes taken by film experiencers to martial arts action films, whether these attitudes stem from their own watching experiences or assumptions about other experiencers' watching experiences and attitudes.

I found that informants view the experience of watching martial arts action films (whether from direct experience or not):

- positively – as films to be enjoyed; entertaining
- negatively – as films to be avoided; not entertaining
- with indifference – have no particular feelings about the experience

While informants often experience martial arts action cinema from more than one of the perspectives I illustrate above – for example, as representations of martial arts; as “violent” films; *and* as entertainment - attitudes they hold towards martial arts action cinema are less often multiple: On the whole, each participant-informant either enjoyed, disliked or was indifferent to martial arts action cinema, and while some felt ambivalent, most informants were clear about their general attitude to the films and/or stars under discussion. In this section my aim is to investigate what aspects of the martial arts action cinema informants find enjoyable, which they dislike, and why some are indifferent to it, looking particularly at how their expressed attitudes relate to the various perspectives of experience discussed above.

Positive attitudes to martial arts action cinema

Informants seem to enjoy martial arts action films for several reasons, most of which can be categorized as aspects of enjoying the various types of *spectacle* offered by the films. Informants enjoy the “pace” of the films, and while this refers in some part to the narratives, it refers more often (and more literally) to the actual speed of the action and movement on screen. Informants also enjoy the displays of martial arts the films offer (and around which many are self-consciously designed). The enjoyment for some comes from the spectacle’s status as ‘impressive,’ and/as something to aspire to and/or learn from. For others it comes from the ‘beauty’ of the movements and/or performers involved. Some informants enjoy specifically the ‘realism’ of the spectacles, while others enjoy precisely that such spectacles are *not* ‘realistic.’

A number of informants also enjoy the humour of the films – whether deliberate or unintentional and therefore somewhat ‘cheesy.’ Others enjoy the plots (and ‘messages’) of the films, especially where these provide interest because they provide ‘suspense,’ or where they heighten informants’ sense of ‘escapism’ that so many cite as enjoyable.

In no case did martial arts action film watchers say or imply that they enjoy watching “violence” or find “violence” entertaining. This is despite the fact that many informants cited the fight sequences in the films as entertaining and enjoyable; this in turn underscores the extent to which film experiencers are generally quite capable of distinguishing between “real” violence and representations of it, where – as Hill found – the former is not regarded as entertaining but the latter *is*. Also, some informants pointed out that even many of the *representations* in martial arts films are not of “violence,” since martial arts are not necessarily violent unless they are used in a genuinely aggressive manner.

At the same time, many non-watchers of the films identify “violence” as something they perceive watchers of the films enjoying about them. Also, some watchers who made it clear that *they* do not enjoy the “violence” do identify the films as such, *and* say that other watchers enjoy that aspect of the films. In both these cases informants deny their own enjoyment of “violence” – even if they watch the films – but attribute such enjoyment to “others.” This move is also often made by film critics and theorists, as well as in the press and by some censoring bodies. Since I find no evidence that film experiencers enjoy “violence” – although some *do* enjoy “representations” of it provided they are not of “real” violence – I suggest that the prevalent belief that there

are film experiencers who do enjoy “violence” comes not from any basis in research, but rather from the imaginations and assumptions of critics, theorists and those involved in forming and perpetuating the “folk theories of the media” which are described and condemned by both Hill and Barker and Brooks.

Certainly my case study strongly indicates that the spectacle and other aspects of experience offered by martial arts action cinema are enjoyed not because they are “violent” but for a variety of other reasons. It also indicates that narrative is not of great significance in film experiencers’ enjoyment of martial arts action cinema, although it does play a role for some of them – although a role most often subservient to the role played by spectacle. This suggests that critics and theorists alike might do well to focus on these aspects of martial arts action films, rather than insisting that “violence” and “narrative” are the central elements in understanding, theorizing and evaluating them.

Other attitudes to martial arts action cinema

Some informants do not enjoy martial arts action cinema, but either dislike or are indifferent to it. Those informants who dislike the cinema are most often those who never watch the films because they perceive them as too “violent” and/or “dumb” to interest them. These informants, like many critics and theorists who also dislike martial arts action cinema, often use language that indicates the (perceived excess of) “violence” and/or the (perceived lack of) “plot” of the films are the most important elements to consider in their evaluation. As Chapter 5 shows, such attitudes are held by a range of informants – including martial arts practitioners as well as non-practitioners, and men as well as women.

Those informants who are largely indifferent to martial arts action cinema either have little or no experience of it (often because they do not think its “violence” will appeal to them), or simply choose not to invest much time watching the films since they neither like nor dislike the few they have seen and/or what they have heard about such films. This attitude is not held by many informants, as Chapter 5 shows; it is held, though, by male and female informants, and by practitioners and non-practitioners alike.

As what martial arts action cinema is experienced

This aspect of experience refers to how martial arts action films are perceived by film experiencers, focusing on what it is they regard those films as representing and “being.”

I found that informants experience and talk/write about the films and/or stars of martial arts action cinema as:

- representations of martial arts (whether positive, negative or mixed)
- “violent” films (or not)
- having an “effect” or other influence on watchers (or not)
- “dumb” films (or not)
- “entertainment” (or not)
- “realistic” (or not)

In addition, the term “martial arts action films” is understood differently by different informants: Some see the term as encompassing US as well as Chinese, Hong Kong and other films, while a significant number only really see it as applying to the latter films (and tend to regard the US martial arts films as “action films”). This too shows a difference in what martial arts action cinema is experienced as.

Many informants talk or write about the films in terms of how spectacular and entertaining they are (or are not), where most watchers identify them primarily as one or both of these things. Also, many informants seem interested or concerned to discuss or comment on how martial arts are represented in martial arts action cinema (and sometimes in other action films), where they are also interested in how “realistic” those representations are. While this interest in “realism” is sometimes talked about in relation to plot (where “true stories” are generally favoured) it is most often talked of in the context of whether – and how – skilled martial arts film stars are at martial arts.

Many informants see the films as having potential “effects” or other kinds of influence on their watchers, although rarely on themselves-as-watchers. Although very few watchers suggest these “effects” are direct, many do suggest that films might influence watchers in indirect ways, and/or believe that they do effect children more than – or rather than - adults.

In contrast, non-watchers often assert that martial arts action films definitely effect their watchers – adults and children; in particular they suggest or assert that watching the films makes their watchers violent – or at least pander to already violent watchers. Watchers seem aware of this perception. In this context, many informants who are also watchers of martial arts action films argue either that the films are not violent, or that they are less violent than other films (especially those that involve guns), or that

they do not enjoy the “violent” aspect of them (even if other watchers do or might). Here again, the experiences of actual film watchers are shaped in significant ways by responses to ways in which martial arts action cinema is represented by many critics and theorists as well as (or perhaps, and therefore as) other commentators, policy-makers and non-watchers.

Concluding hypotheses

My research does not suggest that *all* watchers of martial arts action cinema contradict dominant theoretical, critical and other interpretations of and assumptions about them; nor does it suggest that *all* non-watchers share such dominant beliefs. What it does suggest, though, is that there exist a significant number and range of challenges to these dominant beliefs about and caricatures of martial arts action films and their “audience,” and that theorists and critics have a lot of work to do in that regard. The information I cite in Chapter 2 and throughout Chapter 5 provides plenty evidence that many critics and theorists fail to understand and thus to represent many aspects of experience available to film experiencers from martial arts action films. It also indicates what critics and theorists are missing, and as such potentially changes and complicates ways in which martial arts action cinema and its watchers can be theorized, criticized and otherwise represented in professional, academic and other discourses.

This underscores my central position that critical and theoretical work can be informed and developed by considering contextual as well as textual aspects of meaning-production and understanding, and that this might well be done in part by consulting film experiencers to see what *actual* experiences and interpretations take place in the material world. As such, case studies such as mine can help to decrease the problematic gap between film theory and film criticism and actual film experiencers about and for whom it supposedly writes. It does this not least by elucidating whose receptions are (and whose are not) represented in film theory and criticism at present, and by redressing that balance insofar as it gives voice to thus-far “missing” voices and acknowledges their significance in understanding films. I discuss these issues further later in the chapter, but for now turn my attention to methodological issues.

While I found both questionnaire responses, letters from and even Internet comments by informants extremely valuable sources of film experienter information, I found interviewing groups and individuals by far the most productive and appropriate way to access film experiencers' opinions and ideas about martial arts action cinema. The dialogic aspect of the method – the very fact that it is based on conversation rather than one-way communication – is centrally important here. It enabled me (and informants) to clarify what was being said and meant, and also enabled me to get a clearer sense of their motivation to participate in research and their attitude to the process of research.

I am also satisfied that carrying out for the most part individual rather than group interviews is an effective and useful method of consulting film experiencers about films. While I acknowledge that group interviews have certain advantages for certain projects, and that they are arguably better equipped to study ways in which film experiencers exist and interact as groups¹, I do not think group interviews were appropriate in the context of my research. There are two main reasons for this: First, my main concern was not to study film experiencers but rather to consult them as sources in order to better understand films themselves; as such, I was more interested in getting at what individual experiencers had to say than I was in investigating their dynamics in group situations. (This was also why I feel that “observation” was not an appropriate method for my research; the process objectifies film experiencers, especially because it takes into account only external responses rather than internal experiences – as such, any approach based on “observation” would do little to challenge or modify assumptions about film experiencers, since it would inevitably replicate problems I have identified already with theories and methods which privilege the visual.)

Second, I was not comfortable with setting up groups of informants for interviewing precisely because such a method suggests film-experiencers are linked – that they create a group or even a community – simply by virtue of their experiencing martial arts action cinema. This is problematic because I was dealing not only with watchers but also with non-watchers of martial arts action films, and because individual informants often had quite different understandings of what constitutes “martial arts

¹ This is not necessarily the case, as I suggest below, unless the group under investigation is one constituted entirely independently of the researcher and research project investigating it.

action cinema.” Also, and more importantly, I wanted very much to avoid any implication that film-experiencers talking about the “same” films have some kind of cohesive, homogeneous set of experiences that are as or more meaningfully articulated by a group than by individuals. I elaborate on these issues below, in my discussion of CofPs.

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF FILM-EXPERIENCERS?

Overall, I would argue that ethnographically-inspired practices such as interviewing film experiencers in whose CofP the researcher shares provide the best means available of accessing actual film experiencer opinions and ideas about films under analysis. Other uses of interviews – to interview people not in a specific CofP, for instance, and to investigate group dynamics rather than film experiencer input into film interpretation *per se* – are also useful, as is eliciting letters, questionnaire responses and looking at Internet reviews of films by film experiencers to inform one’s understanding and analyses of films and their watchers. I do not think, though, that any of these processes – whether in my study or others I have discussed in this project – constitute ethnography. I do think ethnographies of film experiencers are possible to carry out, but believe they involve more fieldwork – and more *embedded* practice – than my project or others I discuss engage in.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The closest I got in my research to doing actual ethnographic work was, I feel, when I interviewed members of CofPs of which I was also a member – specifically, when I interviewed members of Hawkeye Tae Kwon Do. This is precisely because I was embedded in that group of people in a way that I was not with other groups or individuals who participated in my research. This meant, as I mention above, that informants from this particular CofP felt more at ease around me, and also that our communicative strategies already had something in common. I also think that informants from Hawkeye Tae Kwon Do had a clearer sense of why they were being asked to participate in my research, whereas other informants were less clear about what exactly I was researching and/or why I might be interested in what they had to say.

I think that working with CofPs when conducting film experiencer research is a valuable method for other reasons, too. Getting input from members of the same CofP emphasizes the extent and degree to which individuals linked in some significant ways can nevertheless hold very different opinions from each other on the same topic, and

similarly can experience the same films in quite different ways from each other. Conversely, the method also shows how sharing membership in a CofP *can* shape an individual's opinions, experiences and concerns. As such, the CofP model offers ways to address issues of both structure and agency when analyzing film experiencer responses. Certainly it offers a way to limit the number and range of informants without having to "create" a group of people from which to draw informants. This is especially important in avoiding the plethora of problems, pitfalls and assumptions surrounding the construction of groups or "communities" of text-experiencers only – or primarily – through the research process itself. Here, I am thinking of ways in which researchers and theorists – whether working with actual or hypothetical experiencers – either explicitly or implicitly regard, treat or assume that individuals who watch (or refuse to watch) the same films, or genre, for example, are members of the same viewing community by virtue of that viewing choice.

Where a group or community of individuals engaged in watching and/or discussing the same text/s together exists *a priori*, it makes sense for researchers interested in the text/s in question to study such a group. However, I think this is a world away from bringing together a group of otherwise unconnected people to watch or discuss texts for research purposes; it is still further away from referring to or otherwise treating a number of individuals as a group or viewing community purely by virtue of their sharing the experience of watching a particular text, texts or type of text.

So while I was initially attracted by the prospect of working with the CofP model in the context of film studies to create a new way of and term for studying film-experiencers – investigating what might be called a "virtual community of viewing practice," or perhaps a "hyperreal community of film-experiencers" – my conclusion is that the potential benefits of such a method are far outweighed by its very real disadvantages. Specifically, I think it is deeply problematic to impose any sense of community or homogeneity onto individuals who are linked by nothing more than watching the "same" film or films – especially given the ever-increasing recognition of the impact and importance of context on viewing practices and experiences. At the same time, I *do* think the model is potentially useful for the study of self-identified groups of film-experiencers who watch and/or discuss films as a group. It would therefore be especially pertinent to studies of film-goers who, for instance, regularly attend films and discuss them at a favoured venue or on video at group members' homes; are students on a film course of some sort; or who form part of a group who discuss films on particular Internet sites on a regular basis.

Most usefully, the CofP model enabled me to think through what constitutes a community or a meaningful group in the contexts of research and meaning-making. It is particularly useful in elucidating why it is that individuals who watch and enjoy the same film or films are *not* members of the same CofP merely by virtue of such shared watching experiences and pleasures. The model is therefore useful in explaining why film theorists and critics are mistaken if they assume that similar texts necessarily attract a certain type (or types) of experiencers for necessarily similar reasons, just as much as it is useful in studying groups that *do* exist in meaningful ways.

“CITING THE VIEWER” IN FILM THEORY & CRITICISM

In essence, this project is motivated by my concerns about the ‘troubling division’ between film theory and criticism and actual film experiencers. Specifically, I am concerned about film theory and criticism’s emphasis not on how film experiencers do experience and interpret films but instead on how they *might* – especially since so many regularly conflate their sense of how experiencers *might* interpret films with how experiencers *actually* interpret them.

One obvious way to address these concerns is of course to bring film experiencers “into” film theory and criticism in an attempt to ensure that it is not only film critics and theorists whose voices are heard in academia, the press and other powerful discourses. It is with that aim in mind that I investigate, set out and propose methods for doing precisely that in this project. In this regard I am motivated by the cultural studies position that ‘intellectual work is, by itself, incomplete unless it enters back into the world of cultural and political power and struggle’ (Grossberg *et al* 6), since I believe it is more important to struggle to present a wide range of “voices” – whatever their degree of cultural capital – than to produce neat, all-encompassing theories of and critical perspectives on films, especially since these inevitably silence or at least simplify some film experiencer voices.

However, in citing a range of “voices” I do *not* claim to be setting out how various socio-political “groups” experience and articulate their experiences about martial arts action cinema. While I think the data in Chapter 5 allows for important points to be gleaned about the impact of socio-political identity “categories” on individuals and their experiences and views of martial arts action films, I do not think it can legitimately be

used to draw conclusions about film-experiencers *based on* such socio-political categorization. This raises a complex and thorny set of issues, some of which I hope to address in the remainder of this section.

INFORMANTS & SOCIO-POLITICAL IDENTITY CATEGORIES

One of the main thrusts behind recent desires to open up theory and criticism (and indeed much more besides) to a wider range of voices comes from anti-patriarchal theories and practices which aim to identify and combat ways in which huge numbers of individuals are silenced, trivialized, marginalized or otherwise not listened to in society. The motives of a project such as my own are clearly and inextricably linked with such work and its desires; much of my project involves giving voice to individuals who are rarely listened to in their capacity as cultural experiencers and interpreters, for instance, and also re-evaluating a cinema as much despised or ridiculed for those it supposedly attracts and entertains as for its actual form and content.

In this context, the socio-political identities of informants are clearly of both great interest and great significance. That is, it matters what class, race, age, ethnicity, gender and so on is applicable to each informant, and how such aspects of their identities influence their perceptions and experiences of martial arts action cinema in particular. However, as my research progressed, I became increasingly wary of the value of analyzing or otherwise interpreting the data I collected from informants via categories of class, gender, ethnicity, nationality and so forth. This does not mean that the socio-political aspects of identity I have mentioned throughout this project are anything less than essential to making sense of and understanding people's experiences of films; nothing could be further from the case. What *does* mean, I hold, is that categorizing the results of data from research such as mine in ways that replicate (if shift slightly) differences of gender, race, class and so forth is not only politically undesirable but also epistemologically misguided and unhelpful.

In the first place, I believe such categorization *cannot help* but reinforce an essentialist epistemology (and politics), whatever the accompanying assertions against essentialism: The implication – or even the explicit argument – is that categorizing film-experiencers' words, positions, "readings" or whatever in socio-political categories reflects actual experience, and thus actual ways in which essentialist views operate in culture to shape individual's views and experiences. So, for instance, women's voices are researched and set out as "women's voices" often with the disclaimer that they are not essentially or necessarily what women say and think, but are what they actually

think within the particular culture/society under investigation. This kind of work wants the best of both worlds: it can claim to be anti-essentialist, but simultaneously categorize people's individual responses as indicative of their position in society – whether acquiescent, resistant or somewhere in between. There are political advantages to this kind of approach. However, I believe it is ultimately not a progressive approach, since it inevitably replicates dominant socio-cultural norms even whilst critiquing and arguably challenging them on some (merely theoretical) level.

In contrast, my feeling is that socio-political categories are most helpful when used in more reflective and more genuinely fluid ways to make sense of views and experiences that are essentially *individual*. This is *not* to embrace the kind of postmodern position I attacked earlier in this study; what it does embrace, though, is a shifting of the point at which socio-political categories are “applied” to individuals – shifting them to a place where their very constructedness is most firmly foregrounded. This has come not only from my theoretical ruminations, but from listening to what film experiencers, including my students (i.e., people not involved in my research), have to say about the use to which socio-political categories are put by academics such as film theorists. Many were resistant to what they regard as the sweeping generalizations underpinning such categories; and while I think this does not in itself render such categories meaningless or useless, I do think it underscores the extent to which academics need to re-think and redefine the ways they think about, use and articulate such concepts.

In important ways, a person's position in a socio-political “category” such as those of race, class or gender, has parallels with a person's membership of a CofP: Like CofP membership, a person's racial, sexual or other socio-politically defined and identified aspects of identity can *and do* shape their views on and experiences of not only martial arts action cinema, but everything else besides. But similarly like CofP membership, such identities do *not* shape each person's views and experiences in a vacuum, in definable ways, in ways that might necessarily be expected, or in ways that are consistent either with each other or with whatever theoretical paradigm a researcher might be working within or against.

In some ways this seems a banal point, and one that is already recognized by numerous theorists in film and other cultural studies. However, were the enormity of the point genuinely recognized, I believe socio-political categories would be treated

rather differently – still as important, but as less defining and perhaps with less deference by those who purport to challenge their power and embeddedness.

In simple terms, I do not think enough attention is given to whether a researcher or theorist chooses the words “many,” “most” or “not all” in presenting their evidence and arriving at their conclusions. Were the importance of such small choices effectively foregrounded, and the magnitude of them acknowledged, more genuine diversity and complexity of opinion and experience might emerge from studies of film and other experiencers: The data I present in Chapter 5 might be categorized by using socio-political labels, thereby arguably painting a picture of what certain socio-politically identified groups tend to experience or say about martial arts action cinema. But I do not think this is especially helpful; indeed I think to do so would be regressive in that it would elide not only the complexity and range of individual informants’ responses and experiences, but also the complexity and range of socio-political factors shaping each individual’s responses to and experiences of martial arts action cinema.

Were I to assert for instance that my data shows “a high proportion of young white women tend to have negative attitudes towards martial arts action cinema,” I would argue that this actually tells us very little precisely because it elides those young white women who do *not* have such negative attitudes; it elides a whole range of factors that are significant in shaping the attitudes of both the former and the latter young white women; and it homogenizes even those individuals who *are* in the dominant group here – let alone those outside of it. Such problems are concerned with the concept of generalizability, which I discuss further below.

Another reason for my wariness of such categorization stems from the number of conceptual category-led expectations I had that were exploded when I actually carried out my research. For instance, while it would be disingenuous to pretend I was especially surprised at the lack of clear gendered differences between informants’ views and experiences of martial arts action films, I was surprised by the lack of clear differences between UK and US informants. One of my main reasons for searching out informants on both sides of the Atlantic was to investigate the differences between UK and US film experiencers and/or their experiences of and attitudes to martial arts action cinema. However, virtually no differences were in evidence; only two differences were clear. First, US informants had generally seen more of the films at the cinema or on (cable) television than had UK informants, who had more often seen them on video. This difference, though, was not particularly large, and did not seem to

impact on what informants had to say about the films themselves. Second, a far higher percentage of UK informants commented on censorship than did US informants. To me this was the only notable difference, and certainly the only one that suggests an interesting potential area of study.² But what is important to note here is that a socio-political category as potent as nationality simply is not especially pertinent to categorizing the data I collected – even though it might well be a significant factor in understanding the responses of individual informants.

Having provided reasons for and illustrations of why I do not feel that using socio-political categories to categorize the data presented in this project is useful – either epistemologically or politically – I want to clarify that socio-political aspects of identity and associated concepts are nonetheless essential to making sense of individual responses. The problem is not with referring to experiencers' socio-political identities, but with isolating aspects of identity and extrapolating information about “the category” from such abstractions.

Socio-political categories in film and film-experiencer analysis

Despite my expectations as a scholar deeply committed to feminist and other anti-patriarchal theories and practices, my research leads me to conclude that socio-political categories are too crude and generalizing to be of value in drawing conclusions about informants as socio-political “groups,” even if they are invaluable concepts for understanding individual experiencer positions.

To clarify, mine is *not* the postmodern position of absolute individualism that renders socio-political identity categories meaningless. On the contrary, it allows that such categories shape and impact on individuals in multiple and varied ways, and as such must be acknowledged and investigated to make sense of individual experiences in general as well as of martial arts action cinema in particular.

This whole issue concerns how far – if at all – generalizations can or should be made from case studies of any sort. My view is that while some general hypotheses may legitimately be extrapolated from material such as that I set out in Chapter 5, general hypotheses concerning assertions or predictions about conceptually categorized “groups” of film experiencers (such as “women,” “Black men” or “middle class white

² A consideration of the different countries' attitudes to censorship and actual censorship practices might be extremely interesting, especially if it involved a comparison of the perceived powers and the actual powers of censorship bodies.

women”) are neither sufficiently epistemologically sound nor otherwise legitimately drawn from such collections of individuals’ words.

Janet Ward Schofield provides a useful sketch of researchers who accept that some generalizations from case study are both possible and desirable, while Gomm. Hammersley and Foster go so far as to assert that ‘most case study research must be directed towards drawing general conclusions’ (102). I do not agree with such an extreme position, though, and along with most qualitative researchers I largely reject generalizability from case studies – not least because ‘the concept oozes determinism’ (Lincoln & Guba 28) and because ‘generalizations decay’ (Cronbach, cited Lincoln & Guba 31).

My position is also an attempt to address the concerns of the critic with whom all theorists are all too familiar – that is, the person who reads (or hears about) our carefully crafted arguments (or just our conclusions) and protests that our conclusions cannot be right because they know someone who is an exception to the general rule we present. In response to a study that argues that middle-class Black men tend to dislike fairy tales, for instance, someone will inevitably argue that *they* know a middle-class Black man who *adores* such tales. While those who make such protestations are often missing the point being made, what they say is still undeniably true. As such, researchers should not – indeed, cannot – ignore such protestations. For unless we *address* such criticism – by taking seriously rather than dismissing as naïve such a criticism or explaining away the numerous individuals who defy our conclusions by reacting in ways that do not accord with their socio-political identities – I do not think we have satisfactorily answered the questions we set ourselves about how, when and why socio-political aspects of identity shape individuals, their experiences and their views on all manner of things.

OPENING UP NEW AREAS FOR FILM THEORY & CRITICISM

In response to the criticism that an insistence on consulting and citing film experiencers forecloses speculation about experiencer-film relations, I argue that work of the kind I present and suggest in this project does no such thing. In contrast, I believe that consulting film experiencers as sources of understanding and analyzing films if anything injects much-needed variety and innovation into film theory and criticism’s speculative aspects, since it brings to light a whole lot of as yet untheorized

ideas about and responses to films. I would add that film experienter consultation is anyway necessary to the semiotic project ostensibly at the heart of so much film theory; this is because, as Lewis argues, the signified (film experiencers) as well as the signifier (films) need to be explored to unravel meaning (34).

FILM THEORY, FILM CRITICISM AND THE LANGUAGE OF FILM EXPERIENCERS

In particular, my project raises the important issue of whether film theory and criticism currently have at their disposal the language and concepts to deal with and discuss all ways in which films are experienced and interpreted by film experiencers. My case study – as well as Barker and Brooks’s – strongly suggests that theoretical and critical language are so antithetical to actual experiencers’ languages and experiences that it is hardly surprising such a large gap exists between film theory and criticism and film experiencers. While extensive quotation of informants ‘only *begins* to break up monophonic authority’ (Clifford 1983: 139), then, it seems that it is an essential tool in modifying critical and theoretical language and concepts in film studies to deal adequately and accurately with actual experiences of films thus far neither recognized nor theorized in film theory and criticism. Such use of quotation might also help film studies respond to Dyer’s call for it ‘to listen, really listen, to the discourse of entertainment itself’ (1992: 7) in an attempt to understand, conceptualize and theorize it more effectively.

Certainly film critics and theorists need to understand “entertainment” better if we want to enable students to develop their media literacy: We need to show that we understand and work with the experiences of non-academic and non-professional film experiencers rather than reject or dismiss them in favour of our own experiences. Ways in which the terms “entertainment” and “entertaining” are used by informants suggests not only that more work is required to grasp what film-experiencers mean by such terms, but also that specific aspects of what film experiencers do and do not find entertaining about martial arts action cinema might assist in such a project, and could of itself do to be re-evaluated.

Narrative

The place of narrative – or what is more commonly referred to as “plot” or “story” (irrespective of the distinctions between those two terms in film and literary theories) – is of wide ranging importance and interest to the informants involved in this project. Some claim not to find martial arts action films entertaining unless they have a “good story” (or at least a decent one) as well as spectacular action, while others cite the lack

of a plot as an important factor in their choice not to watch the films at all. Still others assert that the films *do* have entertaining plots, or that even if the narrative is not very entertaining in itself they do not mind since they are anyway more concerned with other aspects of the films. Still others enjoy the fact that the plots are often simple, not seeing simplicity as a negative feature of films watched primarily for other forms of entertainment.

I have my own reservations about claims that martial arts action films generally have especially simplistic or insignificant narratives, as I have discussed elsewhere.³ In contrast, I hold that many such films – whether from the US, China or elsewhere – might often have deceptively simple-seeming narratives, but are generally open to considerably more analysis and levels of reading than commonly acknowledged or attempted. Books such as Tasker's *Spectacular Bodies* indicate their agreement with this position, but still very little work on *martial arts* action films is to be found in film studies – although there has been a recent increase in interest in the “art” films of John Woo and similarly lauded “auteurs.”

In sum, analyzing martial arts action films in *narrative* terms seems to me a potentially fertile area – certainly at least as fertile an area as analyzing them in terms of spectacle. A number of comments from informants in this project certainly suggest that not all martial arts action film watchers disregard the narrative aspects of the films – whether what they find entertaining is the narrative *per se* or the ways in which the films either disregard or use stock narratives to drive their action. What is especially interesting, too, is that many watchers are well aware of critical and public perceptions of martial arts action films' plots, and that this awareness often leads them to defend the films (if in different ways). In this context, it would be inappropriate for film theorists and critics to ignore such aspects of the cinema and focus instead entirely on their “spectacular” elements and attractions. Also, looking in more depth at films so regularly dismissed, ridiculed or criticized might debunk the critical, theoretical and popular perception that such films are “dumb,” and as such are watched by “dumb” people. Perhaps such work might also contribute to an understanding of what martial arts action cinema watchers find attractive and entertaining about the films without assuming that “violence” is a core aspect of their content and entertainment value.

³ I consider the narratives and structure of several Van Damme films in detail in my MA thesis, for instance.

“Violence”

As I indicate above, what both Hill’s and Barker & Brooks’s studies term “folk theories of the media” tend invariably to correlate not only “dumb” films with “dumb” watchers, but also “violent” films with “violent” watchers. Such theories are seemingly inextricably linked with the “effects” tradition and its influences in media as well as other cultural criticism and theory. And despite attempts to explode such a causal-oriented attitude towards films and other media forms, the “effects” tradition still maintains a stranglehold, as I argue in Chapter 2.

This study provides yet more evidence that the so often assumed necessary connection between “violent” images and “violent” watchers is not only inaccurate but based on misconceptions and often offensive assumptions about not only the films themselves but those who watch them. As I indicate in my discussion of Hill’s work, the term “violence” is itself extremely problematic when used to reference fictional events in media productions. And certainly my findings are that for all those informants who decry the “violence” of martial arts action cinema, there are more who believe the films are not violent, that their “violence” is not what is entertaining about them, and/or that although films might influence watchers in some ways, there is no straightforward causal link between screen violence and real violence. The power of these notions is underlined when it is acknowledged that most informants who describe and condemn martial arts action films (and their watchers) as “violent” are informants who self-identify as people who have rarely or never watched a film from the genre.

The range of views and feelings around this issue is considerable, as my data shows. Overall, what is clear is that film theory and criticism needs to address issues of screen “violence” with renewed rigour and a willingness to listen to those who actually *watch* so-called “violent” films. Since neither Hill’s, nor Barker and Brooks’s, nor my own research provides any evidence that people who watch “violent” films enjoy “violence” – but only that critics, theorists and other film-experiencers *think* such watchers enjoy it – this is an important project. The use of the term “violence” itself needs re-evaluation, as does what is assumed and written about those held to find “violence” in films entertaining.

“Realism”

In a related manner, film experiencers’ frequent references to whether a film is “realistic” or not suggest that film studies could do to reconsider the significance of

such discussions – and in particular what exactly film experiencers *mean* by terms such as “realistic.” As is clear from much of the material I set out in Chapter 5, experiencers who talk about martial arts action films being “realistic” are *not* confused about what is “real” and what is not – but still regard the distinction between “realistic” and “unrealistic” aspects of films as of central importance to their enjoyment and understanding. This might be an especially productive avenue of investigation when considering films or genres perceived as “violent” – especially since many critics and theorists seem, problematically, to conflate experiencers’ enjoyment of “realistic” action sequences with a supposed enjoyment of “real” violence. It seems that this kind of confusion – and the negative stereotypes of watchers that result from it – would be considerably less widespread were film experiencers actually consulted about what exactly it is they enjoy about the films they choose to watch.

Genre

The notion of genre is always bubbling just under the surface in a study such as this, where a particular group of films – or a certain type of cinema – is under consideration. Early on I pointed to the problems of defining the genre of martial arts action films, and how such problems are underlined by the fact that different informants frequently have different groups and/or types of film in mind when faced with the same label of “martial arts action cinema.”

Again this points up an area of film theory and criticism that might be challenged or modified if theorists and critics listen more attentively to actual film experiencers – as writers as apparently diverse as Altman and Neale have long suggested they should. The obvious lesson from my particular case study is that genre is a decidedly dynamic concept, almost impossible to pin down to a certain set of films or characteristics (whether narrative, visual or thematic). This is often true even for individuals - many of whom find it difficult to define and/or delimit the characteristics of “the” martial arts action genre – let alone for film experiencers as a whole. This not only underscores the ever-shifting identity of genre, but indicates the importance of film experiencers to genre construction and understanding. In turn this might open up new and additional ways of approaching genre study from experiencer-centred rather than primarily text-centred work.

Conclusions

The words of those who participated in the case study strongly suggest that martial arts action film experiences – as well as those who choose to watch such films –

deserve more, and certainly more considered, critical and theoretical attention than they have enjoyed thus far. The words also suggest that censors may be working from deeply flawed assumptions about film experiencers and the experiences offered by martial arts action films – assumptions all too often unchallenged, even perpetuated, by those in film and cultural studies.

The critical discourse on martial arts action cinema tends to be either derogatory or dismissive, and is very rarely positive unless an “auteur” is under discussion. Also, such discourse is almost invariably short and superficial; this much was illustrated in Chapter 2. Similarly, theoretical work on the films is extremely thin on the ground, most often citing martial arts films as simply part of the “action” genre, or only expressing an interest when “auteurs” such as John Woo are involved in a film’s production.

In contrast to this, my case study suggests such films and the experiences they provoke are well worth studying, as they are more varied and more sophisticated than most critics and theorists assume or assert. In particular, the words of participant-informants indicate that ideas about screen “violence” need to be re-assessed – especially where such ideas reflect, implicitly or explicitly, on people who watch and enjoy films labeled as “violent.” Participant-informants’ words also challenge the assumption that film experiencers are neither intelligent nor sophisticated enough to enjoy or understand plots more complex than those offered by many martial arts action films – or, on the flip side, that spectacle rather than plot is all that matters in martial arts action film experiences. They also challenge the notion that there is any straightforwardly identifiable genre of martial arts action films; that there are direct correlations between practicing martial arts and watching such films; and that the films and those who watch them are as homogenous – let alone as “dumb” or as “violent” – as they are regularly claimed to be.

These findings all, crucially, indicate that many who identify themselves as critics, theorists and/or censors of cultural texts such as films do not understand the experiences and experiencers they seek to analyze, critique and/or censor as well as they assume they do. As other film theorists agree, the significance of such limitations must be both acknowledged and addressed by any film theory or criticism genuinely concerned to analyze, evaluate or otherwise interpret films and those who experience them.

STRUGGLES OVER MEANING AND POWER

Struggles over cultural meaning and power are key to understanding both why film experiencers and their experiences need to be acknowledged by and integrated into film theory and criticism, and why such a move is so difficult to achieve and still so widely resisted. Such a move shakes up the status quo far more than do spectatorship theories about “alternative” viewing positions (such as those theorized by Berenstein, Doane, and others) or theorists and critics who find positive things to say about films from genres generally derided by theory and criticism. Such a move also suggests that while theorists and critics might be better equipped in some ways than other film experiencers to articulate and theorize experiences of film, they are not necessarily equipped at all well to access, understand and articulate experiences of film that are not their own, or products of their own assumptions about other film experiencers. And such a move threatens to dislodge theorists and critics from the positions of cultural power they are used to inhabiting, since it rests on the belief that the experiences and interpretations of *all* film experiencers are significant and worth articulating and theorizing.

NARROWING THE GAP

In essence, I propose that film critics and theorists reconsider their positions of cultural power and how they use that power, recognizing that consulting, citing and understanding actual film experiencers rather than making unresearched assumptions about them might well produce work that is more reflective of ways in which films are actually experienced rather than ways in which they might potentially be experienced. That is, I propose that film theorists and critics recognize the extent to which their textual analyses and/or evaluations rest on assumptions about film experiencers – whether explicitly or not – and that such assumptions are too often unsubstantiated, delimiting and inaccurate. I also propose they consider combating such problems by consulting actual film experiencers about their experiences and interpretations of films rather than hypothesizing about or “studying” them, and by integrating film experiencer input into the ways they think about, understand and interpret films and their meaning in and for culture and society. In addition, the ways in which socio-political categories are used by theorists and critics might be re-evaluated as part of an attempt to produce understandings of individual experiences shaped by multiple aspects of socio-political identity rather than defined by socio-political categories.

Ultimately, I suggest that film theorists and critics should make these changes by engaging in and/or taking seriously the findings of those who do engage in ethnographically-inspired work with film experiencers to inform their claims and ideas. In making such changes, film theory and criticism might be able to narrow the troubling gap between themselves and film experiencers – a gap illustrated not only in my case study but in numerous other studies of mass media experiencers. And narrowing that gap will not foreclose speculation about experiencer-film relations and the meanings of films, but on the contrary promises to open up new ways to think about, critique and theorize films, their meanings and their representations.

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Participant-Informants

Aitchison, Darren (25, Caucasian American). Grad student. Hawkeye TKD (Black Belt): Iowa City 1999 (interview).

Andrea (26, Caucasian American). Student & aerobics instructor. Iowa City 1996 (interview).

Anonymous #1 (19, female, Caucasian American). Student & life guard. Iowa City 1996 (interview).

Anonymous #2 ("30s," female, African American). Artist. Iowa City 1996 (interview).

Anonymous #3 (24, female, Hispanic). Cleaner. Iowa City 1996 (interview).

Anonymous #4 (32, male, African American). Waiter. Iowa City 1996 (interview).

Anonymous #5 (25, male, Caucasian American). Kickboxer & factory worker. Iowa* 1996 (interview).

Anonymous #6 (36, male, White). Video store clerk. Iowa City 1996 (interview).

Ashton, Ned (34, Caucasian American). Martial arts instructor & owner of Clean Image, Inc. Hawkeye TKD (3rd Dan Black Belt), Iowa City 1996 (interview).

Barnes, J.R. (21, White American). Truck cleaner. Hawkeye TKD (Black Belt): Iowa City 1996 (interview).

Beth (20, White). Smoothie seller. Iowa City 1999 (interview).

Bornet, Aaron (22, Asian American). Student (English major). Iowa City 1996 (questionnaire).

Burgess, Matt. (White.) Health Club Manager. Letter (from Little Balfont, England), September 1998.

Carl. (20, Black.) Kickboxer and factory worker. Iowa 1996 (group interview).

Cebula, Joseph Paul (21, Caucasian American). Student (Film major). Hawkeye TKD: Iowa City 1999 (interview).

Christine. (19, Asian American.) Student. Iowa City 1999 (group interview).

Clancy, Ben (24, Irish/Jewish American). BFA student, retail store manager & kickboxing instructor. Iowa City 1996 (interview).

Clark, Randy (23, Caucasian American). Grad student and Resident Assistant. Hawkeye TKD (Black Belt): Iowa City 1999 (interview).

Cowen, Howard. (Caucasian.) Dentist. Iowa City 1996 (questionnaire),

Crisman, Mark (20s, Norwegian American). Student. Hawkeye TKD: Iowa City 1999 (interview).

Crook, Andrea (24, Caucasian American). Student (Psychology major). Hawkeye TKD (Black Belt): Iowa City 1999 (interview).

Denton, Kerri (19, White American). Student (Art & Psychology major). Iowa City 1996 (Internet questionnaire).

Doyle, Dominic. Student. Letter (from Walsall, England), October 1998.

Edwards, Norma. Letter (from Birmingham, England), August 1998.

Fischer, Simona (16, Caucasian American). High school student. Hawkeye TKD: Iowa City 1996 (group interview).

Fletcher, David. Kitchen installer. Letter (from Brackley, England), August 1998.

Freeman, Dade. Trainee social/youth worker. Letter (from Telford, England), September 1998.

Gahn, Travis (20, Caucasian American). Student (Geography major). Iowa City 1996 (Internet interview).

Gardner, Justin. Electrician. Letter (from Winsford, England), September 1998.

Garringen, Tim (24, Asian American). Student. Self-employed. Hawkeye TKD (Black Belt): Iowa City 1996 (interview).

Gilzean, Chris. Retired Bank Officer. Letter (from Bridge of Weir), September 1998.

Goldberg, Matt (21, White American). Student with "several jobs." Hawkeye TKD: Iowa City 1996 (interview).

Greg. (19, White.) Kickboxer and video store clerk. Iowa 1996 (group interview).

Hall, John. Part-time process operative in frozen food factory. Letter (from Newcastle, England), September 1998.

Hayes, David (40, English/Caucasian). Record/video store sales assistant & DJ. Sheffield, 1999 (interview).

Hayward, David. Baker. Letter (from Bristol, England), September 1998.

Jen. (19, White). Student. Iowa City 1999 (group interview).

John (30, Caucasian American). Pre-med student & Jeet Kune-Do instructor. Iowa City 1996 (interview).

Kausar, Hinna. Part-time student & Video Store Manager. Letter (from Birmingham, England), September 1998.

Krystal. (22, White.) Student. Iowa City 1999 (group interview).

Kumar, Anil. (18, British Asian). Finished A-levels, going to study film. Letter (from London, England), September 1998.

Luke, Vincent (26, White American). Psychiatric nursing assistant. Iowa City 1996 (interview).

Mahraun, Janine (19, Caucasian American). Certified Nurse's Assistant. Student. Iowa City 1996 (Internet questionnaire).

McDonald, Kirsty. (16.) School student. Letter (from Swansea, Wales), August 1998.

McKim, Ross (24, Caucasian American). PhD student. Hawkeye TKD: Iowa City 1999 (interview).

Mendoza, Jennifer (30, Caucasian American). Graduate student and fitness instructor. Iowa City 1999 (interview).

Mike. (20, White.) Kickboxer and factory worker. Iowa 1996 (group interview).

Morley, Adam. (White.) Retail manager (record/video store). Sheffield 1999 (interview).

Morris, Michael (26, Caucasian American). Video store manager and barman. Iowa City 1996 (interview).

Mueller, Al (25, Caucasian American). PhD Student (Communications). Iowa City 1996 (questionnaire).

Muller, Jessica (20, Caucasian American). Student. Hawkeye TKD: Iowa City 1996 (group interview).

Norpel, Troy (23, Caucasian American). Graphic Designer. Hawkeye TKD (Black Belt): Iowa City 1996 (questionnaire).

Pesek, Elena (24, Caucasian American). Aerobics instructor. Iowa City 1996 (interview).

Phillips, Adam. Department store clerk. Letter (from Melbourne, Australia), October 1998.

Phillips, Vanessa. Language & Literature graduate. TEFL teacher. Letter (from Colchester, England), September 1998.

Pitter, Jason (28, Black Caribbean). Barrister. Leeds 2000 (interview).

Purdue, Melissa (19, Caucasian American). Student (English major) & waitress. Iowa City 1996 (Internet questionnaire).

Rachel (13, Asian American). High School Student. Iowa City (Internet questionnaire).

Riley, Ben (28, White American). Food store worker & karate practitioner. Iowa City 1996 (interview).

Roberts, Krystal (19, Caucasian American). Student (Business). Hawkeye TKD: Iowa City 1996 (questionnaire).

Sally. (23, White). Fitness instructor. Sheffield 1999 (interview).
 Shawn (24, Caucasian American). Student. Iowa City 1996 (interview).
 Shelby. (17, Caucasian.) High school student. Iowa City 1999 (group interview).
 Stokes, Michael (White). Video store clerk and administrator. Iowa City 1996 (interview).
 Tielking, Eric (26, Caucasian American). PhD Student (Philosophy). Minneapolis 1996
 (Internet questionnaire and interview).
 Waldbusser, Scott (22, Caucasian American). Student. Hawkeye TKD: Iowa City 1999
 (interview).
 Wilkerson, Tim (30, Caucasian American). Aerobics instructor & bar manager. Iowa City
 1996 (questionnaire).

NB: When I give the place of interview as just "Iowa," the interviews took place in an Iowa town where I attended two kickboxing "tournaments" and was asked by participants not to name the location.

Selected Filmography

American Ninja. d. Sam Firstenberg, s. Michael Dudikoff, USA 1985.
American Samurai. d. Sam Firstenberg, s. David Bradley and Mark Dascascos, USA
 1993.
Best of the Best. d. Robert Radler, s. Eric Roberts & Phillip Rhee, USA 1989.
Bloodsport. d. Newt Arnold, s. Jean-Claude Van Damme, USA 1988.
China O'Brien. d. Robert Clouse, s. Cynthia Rothrock, USA 1990.
Cyborg. d. Albert Pyun, s. Jean-Claude Van Damme, USA 1989.
The Delta Force. d. Menahem Golan, s. Chuck Norris, USA 1986.
Death Warrant. d. Deran Sarafian, s. Jean-Claude Van Damme, USA 1991.
Double Impact. d. Sheldon Lettich, s. Jean-Claude Van Damme, USA 1990.
Drunken Master/Zui quan. d. Woo-ping Yuen, s. Jackie Chan, Hong Kong 1979.
Enter the Dragon/Long zheng hu dou. d. Robert Clouse, s. Bruce Lee, USA/Hong
 Kong 1973.
Excessive Force. d. Jon Hess, s. Ian Thomas Griffith, USA 1992.
Excessive Force II: Force on Force. d. Jonathan Winfrey, s. Stacie Randall, USA 1995.
Fist of Fury/Jing wu men. d. Wei Lo, s. Bruce Lee, Hong Kong 1972.
Hard Justice. d. Greg Yaitanes, s. David Bradley, USA 1995.
Hard Target. d. John Woo, s. Jean-Claude Van Damme, USA 19XX.

Hard to Kill. d. Bruce Malmuth, s. Steven Seagal, USA 1990.

Jackie Chan's First Strike/Jing cha gu shi IV. d. Stanley Tong, s. Jackie Chan, Hong Kong/USA 1996.

Kickboxer. d. Mark DiSalle, s. Jean-Claude Van Damme, USA 1989.

Lady Dragon. d. David Worth, s. Cynthia Rothrock, USA 1992.

Lionheart aka AWOL. d. Sheldon Lettich, s. Jean-Claude Van Damme, USA 1990.

Missing in Action. d. Joseph Zito, s. Chuck Norris, USA 1984.

Night of the Warrior. d. Rafel Zielinski s. Lorenzo Lamas, USA 1991.

On Deadly Ground. d. Steven Seagal, s. Steven Seagal, USA 1994.

The Perfect Weapon. d. Mark DiSalle, s. Jeff Speakman, USA 1991.

Police Story/Ging chaat goo si. d. Jackie Chan, s. Jackie Chan, Hong Kong 1985.

Police Story III: Supercop. d. Stanley Tong, s. Jackie Chan & Michelle Khan (Yeoh), USA 1992.

Rage & Honor. d. Terence H. Winkless, s. Cynthia Rothrock, USA 1992.

Return of the Dragon/Meng long guojiang. d. Bruce Lee, s. Bruce Lee, Hong Kong 1972.

Sanctuary. d. Tibor Takács, s. Mark Dacascos, USA 1997.

The Street Fighter/Gekitotsu! Satsujin ken. d. Shigehiro Ozawa, s. Sonny Chiba, Japan 1974.

Terminator Woman. d. Michel Qissi, s. Karen Sheperd, USA 1993.

TimeCop. d. Peter Hyams, s. Jean-Claude Van Damme, USA 199X.

Under Siege. d. Andrew Davis, s. Steven Seagal & Tommy Lee Jones, USA 1992.

Universal Soldier. d. Roland Emmerich, s. Jean-Claude Van Damme & Dolph Lundgren, USA 1992.

APPENDIX A: SOME PARTICIPANT-INFORMANT RESPONSES

Interview with Scott Waldbusser

Iowa City 1999 - (Caucasian, 22, works for Clean Image, Inc. & is a Marketing student (Senior) at UI, plays baseball, basketball & golf; has been doing martial arts since 8; is a red belt in TKD & Hawkeye National Team Captain; lives in IC, from Genesco, IL.):

SH: What types of film do you watch and enjoy, mostly, would you say?

SW: ..all different kinds of movies, some more than others ... obviously action films. I used to go to the movies at the theater a lot more when I was in HS when I didn't have as many bills and, you know, money issue ... all the new movies, no matter what they were... but now it's ... when it's something I really want to see I'll go to the theater; a lot of times I'll just have to wait till it comes out on video.

SH: you watch much on video?

SW: yes. much more so. I would rather go to the theater. It's more fun - good sound, good picture - it's just more of a good atmosphere...

..... SH: do you enjoy action films, particularly?

SW: it's from, starting from tae kwon do - or just starting sports from so young of an age, it just is something that's always interested me, and it progressed on - that's just something my dad would watch when I'd watch movies with him... it went on from there, I guess.

SH: so d'you watch a lot of martial arts films or various types of action film, or..?

SW: I'd say various - sometimes a lot of martial arts films. it's also a factor because I live with - er, three of my friends are Japanese and they're also in TKD, so that, that plays a big factor sometimes in the choice of movies we get. we do actually - it's not always action... wide variety of things we own or we'll just rent. then a lot of times if we can't find anything that's new, anything that's ... always go back, say, to martial arts.

SH: not good in Iowa City?

SW: no, it's not. it's a very small, ltd collection.

SH: D'you watch mostly US or Asian films, does it vary or does it depend what's available?

SW: it's probably whatever's available and a little bit of both. um, a lot of times, I think that Asian ones have better fighting scenes but for me, y'know, it's not always easy to understand, with subtitles - maybe not understand, but it's just not as coherent - it doesn't run as smooth when the mouths aren't going at the same time as the words, so it just... whatever's there, though, whatever looks good.

SH: do you like the action specifically, or..?

SW: yes... yes. if I do that then it's just watching one scene of a movie if someone says it's a cool fight - it's not the entire movie where I have to struggle through it.....

SH: tkd tournaments?

SW: no, actually I have seen - I guess the only reason I've seen what you might call actual live tournaments of kickboxing or tkd is because I'm in - I'm in tkd and I have access to -- I don't know if you;d call them movies, but home movies or documentaries like this, so I've been able to watch Olympic fighting, international competition - erm, stuff that you can actually study and learn from, stuff that's actually happened.

SH: ... main differences?

SW: for the fictional movies, I think, you can get kicked like 10,000 times in the face and you can keep fighting back and if that happened in real life, no matter what padding you - you're wearing, if you got kicked that hard that many times you'd, you'd go down... it's a lot more dramatic in the fictional movies.

SH: uh-huh.

SW: ...the sound effects. when you get hit it doesn't sound anything like it does in a movie, and I think everyone pretty much knows that... but....

SH: how d'you think martial arts are represented in fiction films? and m martial artists?

SW: I think - I think it's getting more accurate. b4 I think there were just people beating other people up, coz, um, even though it was beginning to become more accepted and more, um, know about, I think like when I was growing up in the mid-80s... late 80s, there wasn't a lot know in America compared to now about the different martial arts, the differences between each one and how they're done. so any time - you could find someone that knew a little bit it seemed like you could put them in a movie - it seems like it was just one really good guy, just beating the crap out of the others and then everyone thinking well I can join karate or tkd or whatever, and then I'll turn into this... whatever, and they don't realize that it's actually hard work and that - that what you see in the movies is not most of the time what you're going to get ... when you're done..... I think it's becoming more realistic now but at first[unclear] ...I know I did - I had an unrealistic view of what I thought the movies portrayed.

SH: does it matter? does it effect people how - when they respond to you?

SW: I don't know if it's the movies' fault or - it probably has to do with the movies, but it seems like anytime you tell people you're in any martial art or something, ... they're like oh are you gonna kick my ass now, or... y'know, kind of joking, but they expect you to maybe fly off and do something that maybe they're seen in a movie, and that - it's kind of annoying.... your friends say, y'know, whatever, but when other people you just meet say that you're like, you have no idea what you're talking about and you're just acting stupid - what I want to tell them really, but of course you can't.

SH: [people who don't do them think people who do are aggressive/violent at all?]

SW: I think they do - I think, I think not as much - actually, I think as the same thing with ... how perceptions from the 80s to 90s have changed with the movies, I think it's the same thing: I think now there's so much more knowledge about it and there's so many more kids doing it, and it's just - not to sound cheesy, but tai bo - that kind of exploded and that has an impact, and I think more people realize that it's not just a bunch of people getting all worked up and going out and beating people up... they

might've thought that a little bit more before, it's more - more information out there now... they actually realize it's meant to be an art form, a way of expressing yourself, and so... I think it's a really good thing because a lot - a lot of times if you start or you're helping out... teaching a beginner's class or whatever, you'll have say 45 white belts in that class and they've never done anything before but they see it - they get there and a lot of times the first day they're like, they're thinking they're all big and strong and cool and like I can do this and whatever, but they do and then they put on a uniform and then - you just let them punch and try to kick... without teaching them anything, and they've no idea what they're doing and they look, just, ridiculous, and even if they just stop it, after getting a yellow belt or whatever, at least they know - they're not, you know, that they're not all that and what they thought they were and - if that helps at all, I think it does.

SH:what kinds of people watch? do martial artists or others?

SW: I think it's primarily - for the most part it's people that do watch martial arts, people that whether or not they can do it they wish they *could* do it - and I think the most, like, dominant characteristic of the people that watch martial arts, I think, is just males.... I just can't see - not to be stereotypical - I just can't see a group of girls going out and saying... let's rent this Steven Seagal movie or whatever, tonight, and have a party - I just can't see that... I think it has to do - it has to do with lots of things. I think if you're just going to go out and rent a movie, and you just want something that's has beating the crap out of somebody or kickin' somebody's ass - that's what I see martial arts movies, a lot of them, as - at least in the past. I dunno - maybe it's coz I, I think that - just being more aggressive, like males being more aggressive, that's why I see wanting to be that person, thinking oh maybe if I join I can be that person.... I can be like this, but... but then again I see, no matter, male or - or female, if you're in tae kwon do, being interested in martial arts movies.... that's what you do.

SH: what are women like in them?

SW: I think they are - I think they've gotten a lot better. it seems like it used to be - just, there was like a core, a group of a few male actors and they were in all the different movies - so you'd have, you'd have a decent variety of movies to choose from, but they all had either this actor or that actor, you didn't have much of a choice. Now there's - there's enough really good female martial artists that they actually have their own movies. I mean you'd see that if you go to - depending on the video stores you go to, you can actually see that.

SH: Is it like that in non-American films, you think?

SW: um - I don't know how fair all the kinds of representation is - a lot of times it seems like, and I think this is the way with all American cinema, like America good - and whatever other country, that we want, they're gonna be bad. no matter if they're - yes. a lot of times I don't think the Asian countries are treated as fairly because they'll have - say an American, and I don't know if you can call this treated unfairly, but you - you'll have like a movie made in America and the star'll be American, and then - he'll just beat the crap out of everyone, and it can be just like a Korean master and a Japanese master and he'll just go through them all like they're nothing - when in real life, it's nowhere near that. but I think it is getting better. I think Bruce Lee was well portrayed, ... before he died that began to make some of his - a lot of his movies in Hollywood, which is a giant especially for that time, I think the early 70s, and now, a lot of Jackie Chan's movies are being, er, promoted much more in America and are being made in America, and I think it's more acceptable now than it was...

SH: which stars do you know/like?

SW: I initially -- the first movie I saw was karate kid, and that - that right away, was - I don't particularly like Ralph Macchio or anything, but that movie right off the bat is what got me really interested when I was about 7 years old.... watching that. and then, I think -- Jean-Claude Van Damme: although his movies, today, are going steadily down hill, and have pretty much crashed his career, I think some of his early ones are actually good. I dunno. maybe they had more content - and now I think they're just: him trying to be an actor, it not working, and then showcasing him.

SH: why d'you say you prefer earlier plots?

SW: I think because they actually had a plot! compared to the ones now, that if they actually do have a plot they're just so ridiculous and sort of stupid, and - it almost hurts to watch it, you know. the earlier ones were just like- real life, like some of them were actually based on true stories and then - I think that's always more interesting, when you see something like that that's based on something that actually happened.

SH: Dux...

SW: yeah, Bloodsport - that was a really good movie, in terms of martial arts movies. that and Kickboxer was a good movie. they just - they just seemed more realistic and more, I dunno - not stupid. that's not a very intelligent way of saying it, but they were just - not boring.

SH: what about violence in these films? what d'you think -- are they..?

SW: I think coz you can't do that in real life - then, it's something - it's fun to watch it, I'm sure for the actors - not so much to get out the aggression, but these - these are things that you're like not allowed to do, legally, obviously, in real life, just actually go into a fight like that and showcase your talents - and when you get a chance to do that on the screen, I'm sure they enjoy that, and if you get to watch that, it's like actually watching something you - I don't want to say you wish you could do, in that way, but it's something that - everyone wants to be the good guy, and to win, and ... to like, to beat up the bad guy or whatever, and since you can't do that it's kind of a way -- almost like putting yourself in there.

SH: would you call them violent compared to other actions films?

SW: I don't think they're any more violent than other action films I think - I think that if more of the fighting is .. hand to hand, if there's not a lot of guns going off and bombs and just blowing the other person's head off -- then you get into a whole other area of what I think is the parents' responsibility - to turn.... what the kids watch. no matter what they say, I can't control that and they do have a major impact on that.

SH: you think kids watch martial arts films?

SW: I think they are more now, and there's a lot more cartoons I think - like power rangers, or whatever there is now, that play to the kids' interests. but I think, I think the children's' interest in martial arts is steadily going up, from - from when I first joined when I was 8 to where it is now... there's, y'know, you go to a class and there's 60 kids in the classes and there was ten when I was there, so...

SH: [range... stars in US films talented?]

SW: not by a long shot. I think some of them are..... but a lot of them are just - they maybe have one skill say in terms of martial arts they might be able to do it, and then they're just ... here make a movie... but you can tell bad acting, and I haven't been able to see a lot, many foreign films, but in terms of American films there's a lot - of bad acting.

SH: are they – the actors, are they actually good at martial arts? d'you think – or know, do they use doubles?

SW: I think - I think it could be both. I think there might be some people that are really good at martial arts and that could be the only reason they're actually in a movie. and at the same time you might get a movie that's a little bit better quality - an actor who's a better actor, but at the same time his martial arts skills aren't good and then they'll put a double in there. but...

SH: do you mind?

SW: I guess i don't mind if you know it's fictional - it's always nice when the actual person does the actual stuff that they've trained for three months or whatever to do, like one stunt. um, it only really bothers me if you can tell - and this goes with any movie - if there's a definite, where you see a person's face in one scene, then there's something else in the other, it's totally different... they're trying to mask it, that's the only thing that bothers me.

SH: what about someone like Van Damme?

SW: that's -- I don't know. there's - if you go by what he says or what his publicists or whatever say, he er actually won a European karate title, so many years ago, then other people say he didn't, and this... I think if you watch the movies, whether he is good in real life fighting or not, he has some skill, like especially for the flexibility - he does excellent stretching stuff, but. I don't know if that translates into good fighting skill... he got the crap kicked out of him in new York a few years ago at a bar.

SH: yes. drunk?

SW: I wouldn't doubt that either.

SH: d'you think this matters?

SW: I don't read a lot of tabloids.... I read the newspaper a lot, and - which I think are more factual, and you'll now or again - like when Van Damme was drunk in a bar... stuff like that. I don't think a lot of them have really made a bad name for themselves or anything. the movies aren't always high quality, but ...

SH: uh-huh. what d'you think of the media, the way it shows martial arts..?

SW: I think it does now - but..... with more knowledge everyone now knows that it's not just you're going some place and kicking and beating somebody up - it's Actually a work out, it's self-defense, it's learning a skill - it's all this in one, it's not just, y'know, kicking the crap out of somebody - and I think the media knows that a lot more now. see it in a much better light now.

SH: is it - useful to you?

SW: I think it's really useful, because - the same with any issue. ... give the public knowledge about something they may not have known about before you're worried about having your kid go... now most parents know that's not what it's about, it's about discipline, it's about training your kids.... they're gonna hopefully come out better.

Interview with Jennifer Mendoza

Iowa City, 1999. 30; Caucasian female; has an MS & is a PhD student in Exercise Physiology at UI; works there also; fitness instructor does gymnastics, swimming, walking and stretch & tone classes; from Omaha, NE, lives in IC; has 3 children; husband does martial arts.

SH: what kinds of films do you watch and enjoy?

JM: 'I tend to watch comedy or like action suspense' - usually on video - likes cinema - 'If I had more time, and - it's very expensive'

SH: have you seen many action films?

JM: 'actually I've not sat down and watched a whole film - but my husband has a whole lot' - 'I see like 10 seconds here and there'

SH: from this, what is your attitude to the films?

JM: 'the way I see martial arts is that, I really see it as an art form, just like gymnastics or another sport - you know, it takes a lot of skill and a lot of practice - and the people that do marts, are very dedicated... so from that standpoint I admire their ability and what they're doing... the films - I just wasn't raised in that culture where people go and do martial arts every day of their life!'

SH:... is it accurate?

JM: 'like I said, I see it as a way of life - so I'm sure that what they do is representative of just the kind of training that they have - the situations seem kind of far-fetched. However, my husband was mugged.... did a chest kick. so I do believe there are situations where martial arts can be useful'

SH:...Interested?

JM: 'yes, I think for self-defense' - 'I would like to pursue it' [her husband, a Filipino physician, does a martial art – she's not sure which one].

SH: who d'you think are the kinds of people who watch..?

JM: 'I think a lot of people who do martial arts' - 'I can't - the people that I know who like watching them typically have done some martial arts themselves'

SH: d'you think children watch them?

JM: 'actually I try and discourage my kids from watching them - just from the standpoint from, you know just with the violence. And typically I would think there might be guns or something' - 'I really don't want them thinking that kicking and hitting and hurting other people is a good way to deal with a conflict'

SH: what d'you think about the plots?

JM: 'I don't know anything about them!'

SH:...women?

JM: 'I think there are very few' –[...James Bond one]...

SH: what d'you think – what have you seen of women in action films?

JM: 'for the most part they seem to be just an accessory'

SH: ...are there any martial arts film stars you know, or like?

JM: 'I know that there are several, but I can't name them'

SH: d'you think the actors in these films are genuinely talented?

JM: 'well yeah, I can respect them from an athletic point of view'

SH: d'you think people – many or most of them - who do martial arts are aggressive?

JM: 'no, I really don't'

SH: how d'you think the media represents them?

JM: 'It seems like they're represented as violent - just because, y'know, my opinion is - they seem to set up situations that might not have come up in ordinary life' [.... last couple of minutes drowned out by lad noise!]

Interview with Jason Pitter

Leeds 2000. Barrister. 28. Black Caribbean.

SH: What kinds of films do you watch?

JP: More generally than martial arts films?

SH: Yes.

JP: Um - I'm a big fan of sci-fi, action - and comedy.

SH: Right. And what is it you enjoy about them, and about martial arts films?

JP: oh, to me watching those movies is about escapism – y'know, it's a release. I'm big on entertainment. I do like something that's gonna make me think at the same time, but that's an added bonus.

SH: What do you like then about martial arts films? Do you like them more than other action films, or..?

JP: I think it depends on the film. As far as – martial arts films are concerned, it – I won't say I necessarily enjoy them more than other action films, but it's a particular genre – a genre that I like to – to look myself into. In the end it's just escapism, and some of them can be funny, in their own ways [laughs]...

SH: Intentional or not, yeah? Are there action films you don't like?

JP: I mean – it has to be a good film at the end of the day, if the acting's crap and the plot's crap I'm not going to enjoy it. But when I say that I put martial arts films to one side –

SH: right...

JP: I mean I don't – I don't treat martial arts films in the same way I treat other action films. um, if for instance we use as an example a film like say JCVD is in, that sort of action film I don't like. I do like a bit of originality, I don't like action for the sake of it.

SH: uh-huh.

JP: Where – where there is a decent plot, or something to keep me engaged. I enjoy that. I don't like seeing explosions for the sake of it...it needs originality.

SH: Right, yeah. How do you think martial arts are represented in different types of films?

JP: I think – more and more martial arts in films is becoming – it's becoming part of the background where it's almost not – not mentioned as being something special... I mean if you take recent films, in something like the *X-men*, a lot of the characters in that, who – who are doing martial arts but it wasn't something that is particularly highlighted or mentioned.

SH: Right.

JP: So these – it's there and I suppose it's represented [knock at the door!]

JP: Sorry. Where were we?

SH: You were talking about how martial arts are shown in films that aren't ...

JP: Yeah, yes – you know I think most action movies now, it's almost the norm, where if there's going to be any kind of fight sequence or, or anything like that which doesn't involve weapons, there's gonna be some element of martial arts in there, even at a very basic level – whether it's a few kicks or a throw or something along those lines. Whereas in the older films, you know, the war films and other action-type films – it's more of a straight fisticuffs type of – there's a lot more effort gone into making them now...

SH: Right, yeah. Didn't *The Matrix*..?

JP: Yeah, yeah – in *The Matrix* they got in some of– one of the top martial arts choreographers, not directors, but choreographers to do the fight sequences... [unclear]... initially, as I understand it, they weren't interested in the project, and the directors hounded them, in essence, sent them the script, and when they read the script they liked the sound of the movie. They came over – and this shows the extent to which it's become the norm. The actors in that underwent training for a number of months.

SH: Yeah.

JP: like three or four months – um, it's almost essential nowadays to have, you know, martial arts in the fight sequences...[unclear] to be worth watching. I mean it's another string to their bow, and I mean I think that takes it away, um, from well this is just an ordinary fight. People say, look at that, look what he did – look what he can do. It does make it more interesting.

SH: What do you – presumably, then, you enjoy the fact that martial arts are in other films now?

JP: I think it's a good thing – because as I said, in the course of a year there's not that many films you're gonna go and see, and if you want to see action films, very few of them are really martial arts films, and if you do enjoy martial arts, which I do, then there is that element of spectacle about them. The reason that interest me, I think, at the end of the day, is that they're doing things that you can't do, and that's what films are about. Escaping. And if you can see somebody on the screen who can – who's actually doing something, or – or appears to be doing something which you can't do, you're gonna sit and watch it in amazement, saying 'well look, how's he done that?' or 'look what he can do.'

SH: Do you care whether they can really do it or not? If it's the stunt double, or..?

JP: Listen, as long as I can't tell it's a stunt, though, then that's fine. I mean too often you can tell it's a stunt. If at a later stage you find out that they've done it themselves, then I do have more respect – for the film and for them.

SH: Uh-huh, right.

JP: But if it looks real enough that's – that's good enough, whilst you're watching. If subsequently you're watching again and find out, you know, they've done it themselves – I mean, their performance as an actor or actress, you're more impressed. And I like that... [unclear].

SH: That they can do more than just the kicks?

JP: Yeah. Yes, to go back to *The Matrix*, I mean they were doing that themselves – I mean, a lot of it was done with wires and stuff. Even that in itself – there's a certain skill in doing that, and doing it correctly...

SH: Yeah [laughs].

JP: And like I said, there's a lot of – they use them a lot in the martial arts films, I mean there's ...[unclear]... because they use it so often in their films. And it's a way – you *know* they're not doing it for real, I mean nobody *can* do that for real, but the fact that it *looks* so real – it looks good and it looks real, that's the main thing.

SH: Yeah, it seems to be. So, do you think that martial arts are represented accurately in films?

JP: Er – let's just think. In – in films where it's not made an issue of, and it's just a fact that people do it – er, you know like in *The Phantom Menace*, it was just a fact that the bad guy, Darth Moor, was obviously – he was obviously a martial artist in real life. He could obviously do martial arts – it wasn't made an issue. So the only time it's really misrepresented, I think, is when – there is, where the fact that somebody is doing martial arts is a feature of the film.

SH: Okay.

JP: Yes, and I think that's often – often misrepresented – people in the West or, or typical Western audiences' understanding can take on board their prejudices, or their understandings, of what martial arts is... can take it on board.

SH: So what do you think of the martial arts films that have people, you know, like going to Thailand, and...

JP: No, I mean there are films like that – you come across quite a few and you get some American kid or some English kid who learns martial arts over the course of six months...

SH: Right!

JP: ... and will go beat up the master of that particular style. You know, I don't like those films... y'know I have no time for them. They're typical of that certain type of Western film where – the Western world masters everything, is the best of everything and I think it, you know, it's just a ploy to keep Western audiences happy. To make them believe that one of their own is number one, and I guess it just keeps them happy in watching the films – in which they are the hero..

SH: Right, I guess it's easier, isn't it?

JP: Yeah, it's easier for them to – to enjoy.

SH: Um, you know there's a lot of discussion of violence in martial arts films...

JP: Uh-hum...

SH: ...and lots of martial arts films are censored?

JP: Yes.

SH: What do you think of that?

JP: You see to me, if you've got an understanding of martial arts it's not – it's not just general violence, for a start. There is a – there is an artistic side of it. I, and you know I'm never comfortable with the, the extent of censoring, particularly with martial arts films, I mean half – half the stuff they edit's not like people're going to be able to go out and do it themselves anyway.

SH: No...

JP: All right. And when you consider some of the stuff that is – um, that is edited out, you have to wonder. You take something like *Enter the Dragon* for instance. If you look at the tv version of it, the British version of it, the whole section of it where the - Bruce Lee is using the nunchucks, or whatever you call it, is edited out – so you've got a big gap in it where all of a sudden he's fighting, a whole garrison okay, and this – a whole set of bodyguards. But the next thing you see is him sitting in a cave with a pair of nunchucks round his neck 'cause it's cut out a whole two-minute section where he uses them, and that's all because they didn't want that showing. Didn't want – 'cause they think everybody's gonna run out and get, get a set of them and start killing people. But that, to me that's no more violent than somebody running around with a gun...

SH: Right...

JP: ... and shooting six, seven, eight, nine, ten people. D'you see what I mean? And that doesn't actually happen in the film – there are no bullets, no guns, no weapons, yet they still choose to edit out martial arts, which I've always thought is unfair and perhaps unnecessary. You know *particularly* in a film like that where they do show, erm, the background towards – the background of the fighting and of the martial arts skills and what it's all about.

SH: Yeah...

JP: I mean there is that whole sense of honour, and there is that whole sense of going through the school and not being ...[unclear]. So I dunno, I'm always unhappy with it – I guess it can be justified on the basis that when, when people see martial arts films, they see people doing all of this stuff – without weapons – and doing things with their own bodies and thinking, 'well he's just a man, I must be able to do it myself.' So I mean perhaps because it's closer to reality in that sense, people may be more inclined to do it.

SH: Or to try!

JP: Yes – to copy – let's not say do it, but to copy it in a harmful way. Because let's not mess around, martial arts *can* be dangerous in their own way, used in the wrong way – particularly when people try to do something that they don't – they don't know anything about. And I suppose the – the censoring can be justified in that ...[unclear]... but when adults watch them they should be able to put that into context.

SH: Right.

JP: I mean if it's just protecting children I think you've got to look at. y'know, the way that they censor or don't censor – or at the access that children have to films including other kinds of violence which are more gory.

SH: Yes, yeah – Have you done any martial arts then?

JP: I have. The – when we were growing up we had a lot of erm, Chinese friends. We grew up with a lot of Chinese people, and that was our entry into martial arts films. Erm, and we grew up in an area where there were quite a few Chinese people.

SH: Right, yeah.

JP: And then martial arts – I think I won't say in general, but certainly I know in my community, I know in the Black community I'm aware of, it's popular – martial arts films are popular. Erm, so I think at an early stage I was interested in martial arts and for a while I did practice Wing-Chun and kickboxing. I know that's a very Americanized form of martial arts...

SH: Well, yeah..

JP: So yes I have. But I think me practicing the martial arts followed ... the movies.

SH: Right, so they did actually interest you in..?

JP: Yeah, yeah they did.

SH: What do you think about the way people who watch martial arts films, or who do martial arts films, are thought of sometimes – in the press?

JP: I think – well, when you're talking about the press, I mean it's always – you know I mean it was always a case, it's like you've got somebody walking around with a gun that they're just firing unnecessarily – it's like they've got a lethal weapon and ...[unclear]... like they're gonna do flying kicks here, there and everywhere – um, martial arts as a sport, you don't really read about. There's that aspect to it, but you don't, you don't read about it in the general sense, and you don't get to see much. You know, in a sense I wish it – I wish there was more accurate information about it.

SH: Uh-huh, right.

JP: Particularly in a sporting sense because – then I think people here in, in England, would have a – a better understanding of what it's all about.

SH: Right, um – rather than just seeing JCVD or..?

JP: Right, yes – JCVD, or you know, just assuming that every Chinese person they see is a master in some martial art. ...[unclear]... It's not portrayed *enough*, it's not portrayed *accurately* enough, if I can put it like that.

SH: Right, okay. And what kind of people do you think, or do you know who watch martial arts films or even groups of people?

JP: Mmmm. Well, I think it is – it's *largely* groups, it's not just the groups, but I think it is largely groups. And, I think it's popular – it's popular amongst young men. I was gonna say in a general sense. I can speak as far as – I know it's popular amongst different racial groups, and I think there is an element of cultural difference... I know it's popular amongst the Asians, in the Indian and Pakistani community; I know it's popular amongst the Chinese – but perhaps not as much as people might think.

SH: Yeah, right – I think that's true.

JP: Yeah, definitely. It's not as much as people think. And to tell you the truth, it may be *more* popular in the Asian and Black communities than it is in the young Chinese community.

SH: Right.

JP: And – so far as, and I'm speaking from experience of me going, I didn't find – many people who, from er, a typical white working class background are interested in martial arts films. That may be a question of access – you know, not knowing people who knew about them, because ... at the end of the day there are not many areas where you go to your local cinema and can watch a martial arts film.

SH: Yeah, that makes sense.

JP: I mean you first see these when a friend, or somebody you know is saying, well have a look at this movie I've got. All right? And as I said, that was *my* entry into it. So, people who haven't come from a mixed community, I've found, haven't had an interest. And you know, I also tend to find people who haven't had an interest at a younger age, I find that they find it difficult to find them interesting – later on in life.

SH: Later, right.

JP: Yeah, and that's because of the way [...unclear]... and I guess it's just in the same way that somebody who at a younger age or growing up watching a particular children's programme, will still watch that with interest. But someone who's 30 or 40 is not gonna come in and enjoy a children's programme at that age.

SH: Something to do with familiarity, then and understanding it, yeah?

JP: Yes. Unless you're me of course [laughs].

SH: Yeah [laughs]. So d'you think many women watch them, do you know many women who watch them or..?

JP: Funnily enough I do know a few women, but certainly not as many as men who watch them. That may be partly due to the – characters in the films. By and large the heroes in all these films are men.

SH: Right, yeah, right.

JP: And, you know, and – they're geared very much towards the male character being the martial artist and in that sense I think it's more attractive to young men, probably for that reason. Or young boys. But again, I think there are more women who watch than people realize.

SH: Okay, right. Do you think many younger children watch them? D'you think they have access?

JP: Yes, yes. [Laughs]. I was gonna say – watching for the first time, children will, will copy the fights... simply because of their imagination. Kids straight away will watch something and pretend that they're the character. You'd be worried if you saw adults walking around pretending they were in a film, so, you know, there is that sense of escape for children watching who say, 'yeah I want to pretend I'm that character' – like with cowboy and Indian or space films, where they pretend to be the hero. So yeah, I find that children are interested in – perhaps more interested in them than adults simply because there is that element of escape and doing something which they know they can't *really* do but can pretend.

SH: Mmm. Do they know?

JP: Well yes, they know the difference. I mean when I was a kid, when we watched them we used to go out and pretend we were in the films, you know, we used to pretend we were fighting and pretend that we knew what we were doing. But we didn't. But what we weren't doing was trying to kill each other, all right –

SH: You were trying to look like it?

JP: Yeah exactly – in the films it turned out that these people were killing each other [laughs], all right, in the same way – you know as a child you watch *Star Wars* and you pretend you're in *Star Wars*, and you shoot each other, pretend to shoot each other as well, but you know the difference, you know – I think kids aren't given enough credit in that respect.

SH: Right, I agree. Yeah...

JP: Yeah, and all it takes, if anything, is a bit of explanation or somebody watching with them explaining the difference to them *if* they need it. You know, I'm not so sure they do need it.

SH: Yeah, certainly the few kids I've spoken to about this are very well aware. They're not stupid. I don't think most children are.

JP: No.

SH: Right. Which martial arts films or stars do you like, or dislike?

JP: Um, like everybody I like Bruce Lee, but that's a particular type – a more serious type. Typical martial arts you're looking at something like Jackie Chan's early stuff – people like Chow Yun-Fat, although that's a different genre again...

SH: More guns!

JP: Yeah. People like Sammo Hung, or Jet Li... [unclear]... different styles, I mean early Jackie Chan films are all very traditional. And there's all very artistic, very flowery sorts of martial arts.

SH: Yes, uh-huh.

JP: Then the Bruce Lee stuff is all, you know, very real and – and more what it would be like in a, in a real fight.... [unclear]... more serious. But yeah I like it all in a way – Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung, they're my favourites.

SH: Okay, yeah. And d'you think that the –like the Western stars like Seagal, Van Damme, do you think they – how do they compare..?

JP: Well yeah, people like Segal don't – he's just an actor, I don't rate him at all as a martial artist. Um, Van Damme – he does do a good job in a certain respect.

SH: He's flexible! [laughs].

JP: Yeah, he is – that's about it. You know, they do a good job with edits and camera angles to make it look good, but... again, it's not the real thing.

SH: Yeah, with Bruce Lee you can just stand back with the camera.

JP: Yeah, you didn't have to put him in slow motion, he looked just as good in fast motion – you can just let him get on with it. A lot of times those other people, they're not very good martial artists, but work very hard at performing as well... [unclear].

SH: So what is it you like – I mean you said you like the escapism...

JP: Yeah, yeah.

SH: and you also said that a lot of young men, adolescent men maybe identify with male protagonists – so what is it you think that, why is it martial arts films that you find particularly appealing? Do you know what it is?

JP: Well --- I think, if there is that possibility, that it, it *could* be real, in a certain respect it's more appealing. Do you see? So if you see somebody fighting without weapons, doing real moves and protecting themselves or beating somebody up, and they're able

to do it themselves – there is something more realistic about that than somebody who's gonna get a big bazooka from upstairs in their attic and shoot somebody – because nobody's got one. But this is somebody who is doing something with his body which is – isn't necessarily out of the reach of everybody...

SH: Right.

JP: And, the closer it is to what's possible – I think the more appealing it is, in a sense. And the fact that it is for a lot of people just so, so new – I mean it's something that they didn't necessarily think of or conceive as really being possible at first, but when they see somebody do it... [phone rings!]

SH: The last couple of questions – I think you said at some point that you care about some kind of plot, so how much does plot matter to you?

JP: Um, well, I think it works in inverse proportion to the amount and quality of the action.

SH: Uh-huh.

JP: As I said, if there's something on the screen which is a great spectacle, and the effects are brilliant, or it's just very funny – I think that can, that can outweigh the fact that something might have a weak plot. All right? I think the main thing is how much you enjoy the film, and all those factors come into it – I mean they're all variables that control it as a whole, whether or not you enjoy ... I don't look at enjoyment as a separate entity, I think all those things go into making the film enjoyable or not. If the plot's very weak, you'd better make up for it in other ways.

SH: Uh-huh.

JP: You know, I've seen some films where the plot's just *awful*, but I'll watch it again and again just to – just for certain parts of the film, or the action sequences, are great.

SH: Yeah, right. And lastly, do you think people who do martial arts watch these films a lot?

JP: I think a lot of people who do martial arts watch a lot of the films, or a certain type of the films, you know, particularly because a lot of those – a lot of the films contain people who are excellent martial artists, themselves. And I think people who do martial arts are able to appreciate, you know, martial arts as an art form, or martial arts as a skill, when they see it on the screen. And they're able to say well, that looks pretty amazing.

Interview with Simona Fischer & Jessica Muller, 1996, Iowa City.

Simona is an honors student sophomore in high school; aged 16; Caucasian female; hetero/possibly bisexual; lives with family; lives in Iowa City, IA; from Albuquerque, NM.

Jessica is a student (of speech pathology/audiology and psychology) and an RA; 20 years old; female Caucasian heterosexual; lives with roommate; does aerobics as well as TKD; lives in Iowa City, and is from Burt, IA.

Simona's an orange belt; Jessica is a green belt; Jessica--TKD for 10 months; Simona for 4 months.

Both go to movies a couple of times a month; Jessica--a lot, when has TV (once a week); Simona not much.

Jessica --"classic and especially comedy"--Simona --"I don't really know... I like just about any *kind* of movie, but I end up watching anything ... If it has a good review, or the preview looks good, then I'll go see it."

[about martial arts?]-Jessica: "Very basic. Not really." [why take TKD?]-Jessica: "It sounded interesting.. and there were some people in my town who used to talk about it... I used to hear the words tae kwon do a lot."--Simona: "I took dance for eight years, nine years, and I got really sick of the place I was at, so I quit there but I wanted to do something... I watch Japanese anime a lot, so martial arts sounded really neat."

[like action films?]-Jessica : "Not really"--Simona : "Me neither"--[put up with?]-Jessica : "Ones that have a plot, I like... but a lot of times it's just one thing after another. I mean I liked *Speed*, but it seemed like "What can we do next?!"--Simona : "Yes, it was just like, how many times can we blow something up?"

Simona : "The reason I guess I really don't like action movies is because I really enjoy the interactions between people that mean something.. and rolling off the bottom of a bus... it was cute, but it wasn't very interesting"--Jessica : "Well, and they seem like a lot of times they're centered at males"--Simona : "Well they are"--Jessica : "You get like the occasional Cindy Crawford, but..."

[martial arts films?]-Simona : "Does anime count?"--"A lot of it doesn't have martial arts... but I like that."--"I like martial arts films if the people are graceful and look like they know what they're doing. Then it's really neat to watch them; it's like a dance. But when it just becomes a lot of people beating up a lot of other people... I don't want to watch."

Jessica : "I don't particularly like them, but since I started TKD I think I pay more attention--like I recognize that kick, or whatever... but they just seem so fake; the sound effects are ridiculous"--e.g. Walker Texas Ranger!

[how many?]-Jessica : "I don't think I've seen a whole [martial arts] film. I've seen clips of them and, like, TV shows... but other than that, nothing really."

Simona : "Really nothing heavy duty... and in anime, a lot of it's interpersonal."

[violent?]-Jessica : "It seems like it to me. Based on my limited knowledge, it seems like the whole part of martial arts they take is the violent part"--"We happened to watch WTR the other day, and they're cops, and instead of arresting the guy, they just beat the hell out of him!"--"That's kind of the impression I had, then, before I started TKD."

Simona : "Most of them are an excuse to, um, use a different kind of violence: instead of guns they hit people in the face... it's a little more interesting, but it is bloody... the main scenes of those all seem to be getting bloody--when you see clips..."

[worse than guns?]-Jessica : "I prefer watching martial arts to guns... it seems like then, at least, maybe the person has a chance to defend themselves--I mean I know it's a movie, but... at the same time, a gun just isn't very interesting."

[what kinds of people watch?]-Jessica : "It seems to me it would be guys about my age, maybe teenagers too--you know, or twenties"--Simona : "I think it's definitely teenagers: probably mainly males, but some females."

[children]-Simona : "if they find them on TV I bet they do"--Jessica : "They think it's cool; I've baby-sat kids before who talk about them and try to imitate kicks and stuff..."-TMNTurtles again. Jessica : "It's easier for them to imitate martial arts."--Simona : "I think that they get a lot of the wrong idea ... they really think that the whole point of martial arts is attacking, and actually most of them are defense arts..."

[attitudes promoted? genuine?]- Jessica : "I didn't. It looked to me a lot more violent than it is. I mean we haven't done a whole lot of kicking each other in the head!"-- "In a way I kind of separate it in my head--kind of like wrestling and pro wrestling"--Simona : "I never thought of them as the same thing... and they've certainly become more separate for me."--"They never show any of the quieter stuff or any of the work."

[martial arts stars talented?]- Jessica : "I think that most of them ... the things you see them doing aren't necessarily what I have experience in so it's hard to judge. It looks right... powerful and stuff. But I think they rely heavily on that, and I don't think there's a whole lot of acting going on."

-- Simona : "I definitely think that the ones in good movies do train very heavily...." read article about woman in *Karate Kid* and her training, e.g. -- "She went from three hours a day to 6 or 7 hours a day training, and she was actually pretty good at what she did. I don't know if she actually got her belts, but she worked up to that level where she could do big kicks well."

--Jessica : "I've seen clips about Jackie Chan and he's very talented"--"He does all his stunts and stuff, and he's funny." (Simona didn't know he's male!) "He's huge in Asian countries."

Simona : "The only thing I've heard about Arnold Schwarzenegger is that he's not a really nice guy"--[seen his films?]-just *Junior*.

Neither if them like Seagal: Jessica : "He may be a perfectly good actor--I'm not basing my view on anything other than 30-second clips. But I juts have no desire to see him."-- Simona : "I've seen the clips, and if I were into action movies I'd probably really want to see him, but... it gets boring after a while..."-- Same with Stallone -- Jessica : "Yeah; I can't remember which one's which" -- Jessica's heard of Bruce Lee; Simona hasn't! -- both heard of Brandon Lee -- and of Lorenzo Lamas (Jessica : "Was he in a soap opera?") -- [never seen "Renegade"] -- Simona : "I just absolutely adore Val Kilmer." Others--heard of, know very little. Chuck Norris--just WTR.

Simona has heard Van Damme's name, but doesn't know who he is. Seen him? "No... I wouldn't recognize him if I saw him" -- Jessica : "I saw him on *Friends*" -- never seen his films -- surprised he was a ballet dancer -- Jessica : "When I think of JCVD, all I think of is previews where it's like "JCVD!"--it's kind of in your face; that's all I know about him" -- [good at martial arts?] -- Jessica : "I don't know; he looks like he's built like he would be."

[care?] -- Jessica : "I think yes, if they're representing martial arts" -- Simona agrees. Jessica : "There's a lot of respect involved ... it's disrespectful if they don't represent it correctly" -- cites WTR again--mad because "That's not what we do" (beat up people).

Jessica: "I have some gay friends, and one of them specifically is hot for Van Damme; he considers that kind of man very attractive" -- Simona : "I guess I never thought of

that before, but it really makes sense" -- Jessica : "Maybe it's because he's so graceful... some of the other guys are maybe more violent."

Questionnaire responses from Krystal Roberts

Iowa City 1996. 19, white female, heterosexual, student (Business BA), part-time job, blue tip in TKD.

Do you like action films? Why/not? Yes, I find action films very interesting. They are very suspenseful and keep you awake!

Do you like martial arts films? Yes, the more I practice it and learn about it, watching it makes me love it more. I watch it for the action, but also because I love the kicking and various other moves. And I also learn more about it.

Do you think martial arts films are especially violent? I don't think they are, any more than other action packed films. They are nothing like "Commando" and those kinds of movies. They are violent, but not as violent as most action films. I think it's fine -- I don't mind a little blood and guts!

Which stars do you like/dislike, particularly? Compare to Van Damme? I especially like Chuck Norris. JCVD -- I do love his movies and I think he is a beautiful guy and great actor, but behind the scenes I think he's a jerk. He loves himself too much! Unlike Chuck Norris, Jean-Claude doesn't do anything extra to make himself a good role model. He's a very good martial artist and a great actor compared with the others. He's a great person on the screen, but off the screen -- puke!

What kinds of people do you think watch martial arts movies, and why, do you think? I think the kinds of people that watch martial arts films are the ones interested in martial arts or just in the action. It seems children watch more and more action films these days and are more interested in martial arts as a sport. I watch martial arts films because since I've been practicing TKD I've become more interested in it and want to learn more about it. My dad watches the films because he likes the action!

Do you think most martial arts/action film stars are genuinely talented? Yes, I think most are. They pretty much have to be or the audience won't watch it. If they just try to do the kicks and don't have the technique or speed, it's not fun to watch, unless you want humor! If it's a martial arts film, someone who practices the sport should be in it, not someone just acting like they do.

What attitudes do you think are promoted by martial arts action films? Do you think they represent martial arts accurately? Do you care? Actually I don't really care because they are fun to watch. But my attitude towards MA films has always been one of interest. I used to watch them with my dad and he thought it would be "so neat" if I could learn that since I was an athlete. So I became more and more interested in watching the films. Now I watch them to learn more and because it's something we -- me and the movie -- have in common.

I think the movies represent martial arts accurately. Most of the actors don't go out and pick fights, they only fight to defend themselves and that's really important in martial arts.