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



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ABSTRACT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. The sociocultural context of MMA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

barred boxing.” And after showing a 60 second clip of UFC 1 he stated “That is what is being done in America today. Maybe there are comments that can be made about the degeneracy of our society, but the fact is that this kind of thing, I think, continues to occur. The only way it can be stopped is through regulation”. When McCain was appointed chair of the commerce committee in 1997 (which controlled the cable television industry) it lead to the end of MMA pay-per-view events until the early 2000s (Mayeda, 2008). Mainstream media at that time also took issue with the sport: Pulitzer prize winning journalist and right-wing political commentator George Will saw MMA as “[...] entertainment in a nation entertaining itself into barbarism [...]” (Doeg, 2013) and Elliot Gorn, an academic who wrote on the history of bare-knuckle boxing, was quoted saying “It’s the whole aesthetic of violence that’s really disturbing [...] what’s striking to me is the connection between television and pay-per-view and profit. This is mayhem for sale.” (Doeg, 2013). The rhetoric used by many political figures (who subsequently banned MMA contests from their states in the U.S) drew on notions that the sport was ‘uncivilized’ or posed a threat to public safety. Stated succinctly by Zembura and Žy & ko (2015), MMA “[...] might be described as dynamic, unpredictable, and violent. Due to the latter characteristic, it is also controversial and receives a lot of criticism from public authorities and media” (p. 200). While most of the rules, regulations, and legal status of the sport have changed⁶ since that congressional hearing, the idea that MMA reflects or contributes to a societal degeneration persists for many.

This informs concerns that ‘sports violence’ in general is a social problem that will ‘spill over’ into society, both by spectators and practitioners. These concerns have been confirmed empirically in ‘real world’ contexts, as heavyweight championship boxing fights have been shown to increase homicides in the U.S, especially those that are heavily publicized (Phillips, 1983), and even National soccer tournaments demonstrably increase the rate of domestic violence in England (Brimicombe & Cafe, 2012). Moreover, the political and moral concerns around MMA are connected to potentially real and legitimate behavioral issues, as psychological research debates the link between watching combat sports (and ‘violent media’ more generally) and aggressive attitudes and behaviors (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Anderson & Carnagey, 2009; Murray, 2008; Raney & Depalma, 2006; Young & Smith, 1988).

2. MMA audiences

Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) audiences exist on a continuum between casual audiences on one extreme, and more dedicated audiences on the other. While those closer to ‘mass’ audiences enjoy the ‘spectacle’ of violence, risk, and danger, those more dedicated MMA ‘connoisseurs’ view MMA as an aesthetic, technical, and informative physical contest. Mass audiences in many ways reflect what Bourdieu (1984, p. 32) called the ‘popular aesthetic’: those ‘ordinary’ dispositions of popular taste which subordinate form for function. In the inception of what was then called ‘no-holds barred’ contests, those more casual spectators were less interested in technique and nuance, than the ‘taboo’ aspects of transgressing rules and conventions (Van Bottenburg & Heilbron, 1996, 2006). This makes sense, given that, in general, mass audiences that lack the ‘technical competence’ of a sport prefer watching danger and risk taking (Coakley & Pike, 2009; Stokvis, 2003). While mass audiences tend to look for vicarious thrills and spectacular violence, for connoisseurs it provides working embodied knowledge through tactics and techniques proven successful in action (Downey, 2006). A narrative espoused by producers, media, and consumers of MMA is that the sport serves as a ‘visual laboratory’ for testing the efficacy of fighting styles and techniques, legitimizing some while debunking others.

At the dedicated end of the MMA audience continuum, MMA ‘connoisseurs’ both watch and themselves practice more MMA than the ‘mass’ audience, and devote a large amount of time to consuming online sources of MMA media and journalism (Frederick, Clavio, Burch, & Zimmerman, 2012; Cheever, 2009; Van Bottenburg & Heilbron, 1996). In general, these MMA fans are drawn online primarily by necessity (due to a lack of MMA coverage in mainstream media) and desire for expert opinions (Frederick et al., 2012). But expert opinions on what, exactly? Andrew, Kim, O’Neal, Greenwell, & James (2009) found that fans rated aesthetics, knowledge, and drama as the primary motives for media consumption. Further, Zembura and Žy & ko (2015) found that fans motivated to attend live MMA events by aesthetics and knowledge consumed much more MMA media than those motivated by socializing and crowd experience. Thus, these connoisseurs consume MMA media and attend live events for the same reasons: aesthetics⁷ and knowledge.

Considering that those who consume MMA media are largely those connoisseurs who view MMA as legitimate, how do they conceive of violence within the sport? While 61% of dedicated fans agree that MMA is ‘violent’, few claim to be drawn to the sport because of the violence (22%) or the blood (16%), or entertained by seeing someone get hurt (15%), the blood (13%), the violence (17%) (Cheever, 2009). These fans report being more interested in the skill of the fighters (90%), the range of talent and abilities (81%), the fighting styles (82%), the techniques and moves (82%), and the competition (73%) (Cheever, 2009). However, Zembura and Žy & ko (2015) found that fans are still, to a lesser degree, interested in consuming ‘violence’, and that it should not be discounted as a motivating factor in the enjoyment of MMA. Thus, while on the surface the enjoyment of MMA seems predicated entirely upon the enjoyment of ‘violence’, existing literature demonstrates a rather mixed and complex relationship between the two.

Importantly, all of these articles operationalize a single, problematic understanding of violence as all forms of potential physical harm (e.g. punches, kicks, chokes). This use of ‘violence’ is both politically charged and morally evaluative, and can cause undue stigmatization of sports and athletes (Matthews & Channon, 2016). While MMA is seen by many as inherently ‘violent’, by

⁶ I would also argue that in many ways the motivating interests of audiences, and the motivations articulated by the UFC have changed. For example, the original premise of the UFC (in 1993) was to uncover who was the best Martial Artist on earth, and which martial art style was most effective. Increasingly, it appears that the rationale has moved towards organizing fights that are exciting, entertaining, and even beautiful. Using ‘performance bonuses’ to incentivize ‘exciting’ fights is an example of this shift.

⁷ Concretely, aesthetics “as it refers to the appreciation of fighters’ skills and willingness to learn about the sport, it should be clearly stated that MMA spectators declare seeking high quality sport performance to be foremost. That is, they are able to find skillfulness and sport mastery in a violent sport such as MMA” (Zembura & Žy & ko, 2015, p. 203–204).

emphasizing the non-violent ‘framings’ of MMA in practice below, I emphasize that what most see as ‘violent’ MMA media often understand as ‘action’, ‘movement’, or ‘practices’. These are non-evaluative notions that generally permeate MMA media, which position MMA more as a ‘craft’ than a ‘blood sport’. Note for example that 39% of dedicated MMA fans in Cheever (2009) did not deem the sport violent. When referring to ‘violence’ (in scare quotes) throughout this paper, I mean to make reference to more general or popular understandings of MMA as a ‘violent’ sport, illustrated in section 1. When I reference violence (without scare quotes) as ‘excessive’ or ‘aesthetic’ (rather than simply action or practices) this indicates cases in which the level of pain, damage, and punishment of fighters is *perceived* by MMA media to be beyond what is (and in some cases ‘should’ be) common or expected from MMA generally. This is not intended to impute any evaluations on MMA as a sport.

3. The (cultural) work of MMA media

Most of the growth in popularity of MMA has occurred in the absence of primetime broadcast television opportunities (Frederick et al., 2012), and little coverage from ESPN (Martin, Williams, Whisenant, & Dees, 2014). Fox is the exception to this; they have online media, TV programming, and the exclusive rights to the free UFC events on television. However, because they are less popular and ‘mainstream’ than other sports,⁸ in terms of internet traffic, the majority of the top MMA media outlets (8 out of top 10, with ESPN (8th) and FOX sports (9th) as the exceptions) cover exclusively MMA news and information (Alexa, 2015). Thus, while much of what mass audiences know of MMA comes from the limited, but often incendiary coverage of mainstream media, MMA ‘connoisseurs’ look toward in-depth online sources of information.

The MMA media serve clear and explicit functions, revolving primarily around distributing information, analysis, and occasionally promotion. The media members themselves carry out multiple roles: write articles for their websites, run MMA podcasts, offer analysis, predictions, match-making recommendations, post-fight evaluations, interview fighters, create official rankings used by the UFC, and are sometimes featured in promotional material for upcoming events. MMA media permeate the sport through their various roles and online platforms, through the production of MMA content of interest for consumers. Often overlooked are the implicit, cultural functions of MMA media: the framing of contentious issues, creating systems of aesthetics and appreciation, and thus a potential basis of distinction. Bourdieu (1984) noted how cultural occupations produce aesthetic, intellectual, and educational work, that provide knowledge of ‘legitimate’ culture to the petite Bourgeoisie. In the case of MMA, which is a newer sport with limited sphere of personnel working towards its intellectual development, media members in many ways are responsible for constructing, invoking, explicating, and applying an aesthetic system. In this sense, they are both the ‘aesthetician’ and the ‘critic’ in Becker’s (1982) terms. The MMA media both classify the ‘good’ and ‘bad’, the ‘beautiful’ and ‘strange’, the ‘insufficient’ and the ‘excessive’, and create the terms for their classification. This evaluative and pedagogical labour of MMA media creates an entire symbolic world of discourse that operates outside the fights themselves, one that is invaluable in the understanding of MMA as ‘art’ within the MMA world.

This also acts as a framework for ‘distinction’ between MMA ‘connoisseurs’ and more casual audiences. Bourdieu argues that social status and taste are intimately related, and that our ‘aesthetic dispositions’ socially distance us from others ‘incidentally’. Succinctly “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 6). For Bourdieu, aesthetic criteria were developed by the dominant class, constituting ‘legitimate’ culture, and legitimate forms of appreciation. The interpretive act of the consumer was necessarily a cognitive act requiring the ‘decoding’ of the cultural artifact by means of already-acquired cultural codes. Because the appropriation of cultural forms presupposes certain dispositions and competences not universally available (p. 288) they necessarily mark a form of exclusivity, in which distinction is the reward. This process is not a conscious endeavor, but rather the result of the embodied, unconscious schemes of the ‘habitus’, inculcated in early life and reflecting/reproducing one’s social position. Bourdieu allows us to understand how our taste in fights, our ability to appropriate MMA is itself a classified and classifying act. Bourdieu’s research was situated within the rigid class structure of France, and consequently he rarely discusses how distinctions form through less ‘legitimate’ or ‘consecrated’ cultural fields. However, he did note that ‘cultured’ classes “were the ones are most capable of applying this aesthetic disposition to less consecrated areas, such as song or cinema” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 263; from Lizardo & Skiles, 2016). This allows for distinction through aesthetic attitudes not necessarily bound to what is conventionally understood as ‘high’ culture.

Because the aesthetic systems of MMA center on ‘violence’ as its object, this often requires the construction of new morals and values around how ‘violence’ should be understood within MMA, which can help stabilize the rules and conventions of practice. As a parallel, Zelizer (1978, 2010) shows how life insurance was initially rejected on moral grounds for profiting from death, but was re-categorized as a morally responsible investment. Both Zelizer (2010) and Fourcade and Healy (2007) demonstrate that commercial behavior can be seen as morally unacceptable and dangerous to the social order, and that successful commodification requires moral and cultural work. As Becker notes, “aestheticians do not simply intend to classify things into useful categories, as we might classify species of plants, but rather to separate the deserving from the undeserving, and to do it definitively (1982, p. 137). Therefore MMA media outline what kinds of fights ‘deserve’ or ‘earn’ the title of art, and that which falls outside art, or is even antithetical to it. Further, the framing of violence allows MMA media to communicate the ‘appropriate’ relationship between violence and artistic appreciation. Importantly, because sociology generally approaches the aesthetic realm as ‘socially constructed’ (Fine, 1992), rather

⁸ In the U.S, American football, baseball, basketball and ice hockey are the most popular, with soccer the most popular worldwide (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2012).

than moralizing or positing inherent qualities of the object in question, the job of the sociologist is rendering the existing aesthetic systems intelligible, and demonstrating their significance in relation to broader concerns like distinction and connoisseurship.

This content analysis of MMA media allows us to unpack the ‘internal legitimacy’ of MMA. As art world ‘insiders’, knowledgeable members bound to the art world, their discussions reflect a unanimous belief in the value and merit of MMA as artistic. Both [Becker \(1982\)](#) and [Dickie \(1974\)](#) agree that ‘core personnel’ of the art world including reporters and critics for all kinds of publications can confer “the status of candidate for appreciation, and thus ratify it as art” (Becker, p. 150). However, this kind of consensus of merit on a ‘violent’ sport like MMA cannot exist as self-evident truth; it requires “logically organized and philosophically defensible aesthetic systems” ([Becker, 1982](#), p. 132) developed by aestheticians, providing new rationales or cultural understanding through which they can be understood (by some) as art. These systems become the basis of distinction between MMA media as ‘connoisseurs’ and the mass audiences whose appreciation is thought to be grounded largely in the spectacle of ‘violence’ itself.

4. Data and methods

This paper operates under the premise put forth by [Wenner \(1989\)](#) that analyzing the actual content of ‘mediated sports language’, by revealing content and structural characteristics that are less evident, can illuminate its’ cultural significance. For a cultural form to manage its contentious aspects, it must have a way to fit within a defensible aesthetic system or be rejected as an unwanted ‘byproduct’ of an otherwise legitimate art form. However, given both the salience and centrality of ‘violence’ within MMA, it must be incorporated directly into the terms of its enjoyment. Because of this, analyzing how violence is negotiated within this inner sphere of art world agents will illuminate the manner in which disreputable issues are reconciled.

My data set is the ‘MMA Beat’, a weekly or bi-weekly ‘panel’ discussion of relevant MMA news and events. The show reflects an example of ‘convergent sports journalism’ ([Hutchins & Rowe, 2012](#)) in which journalists often must produce or repurpose written stories into online video platforms. Often the topics covered are things that have, or are being written about by the journalists featured on the program. The host of the series, Ariel Helwani, has been recognized by Fighters Only Magazine’s “World MMA Awards” as the ‘MMA Journalist of the Year’ for the past 5 years, and has over 400,000 twitter followers, the most among MMA journalists. The ‘MMA Beat’ also features three other prominent MMA journalists, who vary week to week. These journalists work for a wide range of web based media, from more niche MMA media outlets (e.g. ‘Bloody Elbow’ and ‘Sherdog’) to more mainstream (e.g. ‘Sports Illustrated’). According to available web traffic analytics ([Alexa, 2015](#)), the journalists that have appeared on the MMA Beat have written or worked for 5 of the 10 most popular MMA news and media outlets. Over the span of three years, the series has over 120 episodes, averaging roughly 60,000 views per episode.⁹ Because the series features (a) some of the most prominent and influential MMA journalists, (b) a variety of writers from varying MMA news outlets, and (c) has garnered a large audience, the content expressed within these discussions is extremely useful in understanding MMA media discourse. However, while it may be insightful, it may not be perfectly ‘representative’ or inclusive of the totality of beliefs and opinions of MMA media in general. While these discussants are salient figures in the MMA community, each may have undisclosed personal biases. Furthermore, only one woman¹⁰ has been included on the MMA Beat. Thus, it reflects many prominent voices in the MMA media dialogue, but not *all* voices. The data was located on an online archive on [mmafighting.com](#). Twenty-Seven episodes were randomly selected (through a random number generator) and transcribed, totaling roughly twenty-three hours of discussion.

To conduct this research, I deployed a qualitative content analysis of popular MMA media content found online. MMA specific media (those who identify as MMA media and journalists) has scarcely been a central topic of analysis (but see [Channon & Matthews, 2015](#)). Because of this we only know about mainstream media coverage, rather than the specific sources that MMA ‘connoisseurs’ actually use to inform or reaffirm their understanding of the sport. This analysis was carried out largely inductively, derived from processes outline by [Hsieh and Shannon \(2005\)](#). First, using the Dedoose¹¹ coding program, I re-read the transcripts to sort out the relevant text to my research questions. Second, I conducted open coding of 4–5 transcripts to develop preliminary codes to move forward with. Third, I applied these codes to my data in its totality, while adding, combining, or splitting codes into subcategories when necessary. Lastly, as an organized system appeared in the appreciation of MMA fights, I organized the codes accordingly. The patterns, themes, and categories that emerge from the data allowed me to generate an accurate understanding of the ‘frames’ deployed by MMA media to understand fighting and violence.

5. Findings – types of violence and action in MMA

Unpacking discussions around the topic of violence, a clear threshold for MMA action is constructed, that when exceeded, becomes distinctly unenjoyable. However, we find that certain *kinds* or *qualities* of violence can be artful and transcendent (see Fig. 1). These different kinds of action are separated by ‘symbolic boundaries’ ([Lamont & Molnár, 2002](#)) that carve out both the different forms of action seen within the practice of MMA, and how and why each should be appreciated (or not). Within the chosen sample, four ‘ideal types’ used to frame the ‘violence’ of MMA have been identified: (1) an ‘insufficient action’ that occurs through the passivity or inactivity of fighters, which fails to meet a certain minimum of action necessary for enjoyment; (2) an ‘excessive violence’ that exceeds the ‘threshold of repugnance’ ([Elias & Jephcott, 1982](#)) or acceptable violence, and makes watching MMA uncomfortable

⁹ As of the date this paper was written.

¹⁰ Esther Lin of [mmafighting.com](#).

¹¹ Dedoose, similar to Nvivo, is a qualitative and mixed-methods application, useful for analyzing and thematizing large amounts of text.

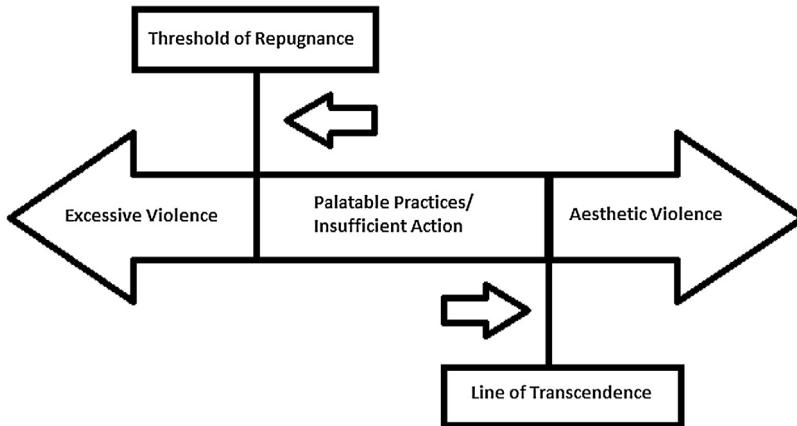


Fig. 1. Model of the aesthetic system. This is a visualization of the cultural work performed by MMA media: the categories of violence and action formed, the symbolic boundaries erected between them, and the evaluations attached to them.

and unpleasant; (3) ‘palatable practices’, or the ‘acceptable’ zone of action for MMA media that is both entertaining, and operates within a somewhat consensual understanding of what is ‘too much’; (4) an ‘aesthetic violence’ that adds a new dimension of enjoyment to a fight. In this, fighting moves from simply ‘entertaining’ to a kind of ‘sublime’ experience; simultaneously awe inspiring, with a grandeur and a deep sense of reverence for the display of artistry. In this formulation, it is not simply that either *more* ‘violence’ or *less* ‘violence’ is enjoyable, but rather that different kinds of action and violence demand different understandings and kinds of appreciation. Importantly, perhaps the least enjoyable fights (‘excessive’ violence) and easily the most enjoyable fights (‘aesthetic’ violence) are generally perceived to be the most violent.

5.1. Insufficient action

It is generally understood among these MMA media members that most MMA fans – from ‘mass’ audiences all the way to ‘connoisseurs’ like these MMA media members (to a lesser extent) – find pure ‘wrestling’ matches, wherein one fighter controls the other on the ground in ‘top-control’ and is largely ‘inactive’, to be ‘boring’ and unenjoyable.¹² While ‘entertaining’ ground-work in which a fighter controls another on the ground while administering significant blows is called ‘ground-and-pound’, controlling another fighter without striking or doing damage is pejoratively called ‘lay-and-pray’. This implies that a fighter uses wrestling to avoid being hit, and simply ‘holds on’ to another fighter in the attempt to win a fight by judges’ decision. While this boredom is in part because American audiences tend to prefer striking matches to wrestling or grappling (Hirose & Pih, 2009), it may also be the one-dimensionality of these fights. In a discussion about changing the scoring system in MMA:

Luke Thomas¹³ (25, 23:11): “People will play to those points in Jiu Jitsu and wrestling, but it’s a defined world, there’s no striking, it’s a quiet little language. But in MMA where you get this cacophony of techniques...if people played to it, it would take away the imagination and unpredictability of it, which is what makes it a spectator sport, and that’s why wrestling and Jiu Jitsu aren’t; because they’re these defined villages. To do that would kind of ruin MMA.”

Thus, it is the fact that MMA is *mixed* that makes it more exciting than some unitary martial arts traditions. It provides a level of uncertainty and variability that makes it enjoyable. When fights become one-dimensional wrestling matches, they negate the multidimensional nature of MMA in practice that make it ‘fan friendly’ – including ‘striking’, one of its most highly valued currencies.

Although being incautious was seen as a way to produce ‘cheap thrills’ rather than aesthetic experience, ‘risk-taking’ in fights is still seen as enjoyable. While Coakley and Pike (2009) and Stokvis (2003) agree that less informed audience prefer risk taking, it appears as though even ‘informed’ media with a degree of ‘technical competence’ largely enjoy risk taking as well. This is clear in discussing the styles of two fighters, Carlos Condit and Jose Aldo. Aldo, who is regarded as one of the most technical and talented fighters in the world, is often criticized for ‘playing it safe’:

Mike Chiappetta¹⁴ (episode 33, 6:50): “He’ll throw an incredible combo and then he kind of just sits back and waits for you to take a run at him and then does nothing and then finally fires back. I think that’s the part that’s frustrating, it seems like he could do more but he’s not willing to put himself out there.”

While acknowledging his talent, they complain about his lack of aggression, and ‘coasting’ rather than unleashing all of his abilities. Conversely, they often praise Carlos Condit, who they do not necessarily hold in as high regard in terms of skill and ability,

¹² In fact, the UFC have implemented rules to keep this to a minimum. Referees can do a ‘forced stand-up’ when they feel that one or both fighters are ‘stalling’ or failing to inflict damage or advance their position.

¹³ Of Sirius XM’s ‘The Luke Thomas Show’, and MMAFighting.com.

¹⁴ Of FOX Sports, The Bleacher Report, and MMAFighting.com.

but admire for his ability to put on ‘fun fights’. This stems from his ‘incautious’ and even ‘reckless’ fighting style, seen as very appealing. Risk is discussed directly in regard to those on the last fight of a UFC contract:

Luke Thomas (33, 22:50): “I think if you’ve got a guy who is fighting for his contract, we always hype it up and say “oh man, there’s a lot on the line, he has to do a lot to impress and excite us”. But really they’re going to do everything they can to not excite you. [...] You have to have really managed expectations, if a guy is fighting for his contract. You can expect him to lay on somebody as much as possible, take as few punches as possible; that’s the nature of the business and the way humans make choices about risk.”

Ariel Helwani¹⁵: “We like, as journalists, when fighters are honest with us in interviews. But why do they say “I played it safe”? That’s a sure fire way to piss off everyone including Dana White.”

Luke Thomas: “You shouldn’t show your ‘hand’ at all, you should say ‘that guy didn’t even touch me!’...when you go out there and say ‘I was risk averse!’ people go ‘oh my god (eye-roll)’.”

While risk taking in many ways exists in opposition to technical proficiency, risk aversion is seen as unexciting for these MMA media members. This may be indicative of a kind of ‘baseline’ for MMA action. While action can extend past the ‘threshold of repugnance’, an insufficient amount of contact between fighters generally produces ‘boring’ fights. While technical abilities are highly regarded, they are clearly insufficient for enjoyment without this necessary minimum of action. As such, this frame *necessitates* action, in which some amount of physical contact is required to be enjoyable.

5.2. Excessive violence

Violence is seen as inherently negative when associated with a breach of the formal rules of the UFC. One case demonstrates this very clearly, when a fighter habitually held on to ‘heel-hooks’¹⁶ after the referee told him to let go:

Luke Thomas (21, 12:29): “Oh I think this is horrible.... The heel hook, when you do it in that particular variety, you don’t get a chance to ‘tap’. In other ways, you have reached a danger point, your ligaments are already in danger before you feel anything. And once you begin to feel the pain, it’s basically too late.... And that’s what he put him in.... Sorry, that is *willful*. In the culture that he comes from, the jujitsu culture, you know, there’s no doubt about it, that type of submission is ultra-dangerous, and that when they tap, you must let go. It is absolutely inexcusable.”

Jeff Wagenheim¹⁷ (21, 16:46): “Even though I would give him the benefit of the doubt in terms of his intent, you still can’t forgive the infraction because of that. [...] It’s unconscionable to do this with such a damaging maneuver... I don’t think he had some kind of hatred for [Mike] Pierce last night. I just think that he got lost in the moment. But you *can’t* get lost in the moment.” (Emphasis added)

This was heavily criticized, and they empathize with those who were injured by this rule-breaking, treating them as casualties of a reckless and irresponsible fighter. This includes ‘cheap-shots’ that occur after the fight has officially concluded. Similarly, when referees fail to end a fight during a period in which one fighter fails to ‘intelligently defend themselves’,¹⁸ resulting in ‘unnecessary’ harm, they express regret and empathy, rather than enjoyment. In the case of this heel-hook, while Ariel Helwani calls it a ‘tremendous performance’, his the discussion centered on the infraction, the potential injuries sustained, and the impact it may have on the career of the receiver, Mike Pierce.

Another clear time in which violence is seen as ‘excessive’ to a point of being uncomfortable and unenjoyable is when a fight is decisively ‘one-sided’, and as a result one fighter takes a disconcerting amount of damage. When this occurs, fights are described as a ‘grotesque’ display, and something that, at its most extreme, is even antithetical to what they enjoy about MMA. Discussing a fight between Mark Hunt and Antonio Silva:

Luke Thomas (28, 20:40): “That moment in the 4th round when Big Foot [Antonio Silva] was on top of him, trying to finish, don’t get me wrong, I don’t think the fight should have been stopped, but I’m not kidding, I was looking at my wife, and I was literally watching through my fingers because it was just torture porn at that point... you literally could have thrown in 2 axes into the cage with Silva and Hunt, and they just would have started swinging the axes at each other. That’s the kind of guys they are.”

Because these fighters were ‘too tough for their own good’, the degree of damage taking place was beyond a point where the fight could be enjoyed. After these ‘excessive’ displays, the MMA media members more frequently express concerns for the health and well-being of the fighters themselves. There is a clear shift in perception; they shift from a categorization as a ‘fighter’ to that of a ‘victim’. They are victims of poor refereeing, rule breaking, an asymmetry in technical abilities, and (as demonstrated in the above quote) even their own will and determination. When violence becomes excessive, the real, corporeal nature of violence and fighters becomes especially salient; fighters are not simply seen as wielders of technical mastery, but also as vulnerable bodies.

¹⁵ Of MMAFighting.com and ‘The MMA Hour’ Podcast.

¹⁶ A submission that can cause permanent damage to the leg.

¹⁷ Of *The Washington Post* and *Sports Illustrated*.

¹⁸ Based on the Unified rules, a fight should be ended when one fighter can no longer defend himself intelligently. This is seen as crucial in limiting unnecessary physical harm to fighters.

Similarly, in discussing the (old) age of particular fighters, the discussion of actual or potential damage is always seen as unenjoyable. Often, they discuss their desire to see older fighters retire, either after a fight in which they take serious damage, or when they are seen as declining in their ability to compete at a high level:

Jeff Wagenheim (65, 37:31): “The other serious part about this for me is that Ken Shamrock is 51 years old, [Kimbo] Slice is 41 years old...you can joke about Ken Shamrock coming back but there are some health concerns. The guy who is 51 years old is not going to have the reflexes of a 41 year old or a 31 year old or 21. He's going to put himself in danger. When I was also down at the Bellator event last week and I talked to [Ken] Shamrock and he said, ‘Why are people questioning me about this? Some guys they get to a certain age they want to go fishing’. And I'm like ‘well yeah but the fish don't hit back.’”

They also note that fighters often fail to retire ‘on top’ and get ‘eaten alive’ at the end of their careers by failing to recognize their declining abilities. As such, they express the desire to watch fighters at the end of their career in ‘fun fights’ rather than ‘tough fights’. Rather than putting the old competitor against the younger ‘killers’ in their weight-class who would likely dominate and physically hurt them, they suggest having them fight people who ‘complement their style’ of fighting,¹⁹ and can be both competitive and showcase their (declining) skillset. As such, fights with high ‘stakes’ or ‘title implications’ are seen as unappealing match-ups for older competitors.

This creates distinct morals and values around the enjoyment of violence. While MMA is a combat sport, the enjoyment of unnecessary, illegal and asymmetrical violence transgresses the shared moral and aesthetic boundaries of the MMA media members in this sample. It is these moments where, for these MMA media members, the sport is indeed *violent* in a real, tangible way. This creates ‘distinction’ between those more casual or ‘mass’ audiences whose gratification comes more from the ‘spectacle’ of violence in MMA. For these MMA ‘connoisseurs’, enjoying MMA is *not* synonymous with the enjoyment of the suffering of the athletes involved. While violence can be highly enjoyable (see Section 5.4), this ‘excessive’ violence has no aesthetic value. In fact, excessive violence is not simply a neutral object, it is distinctly repugnant; in these moments of excess the often ‘beautiful’ and ‘artistic’ sport of MMA becomes an ugly spectacle. As such, the framing of excessive violence *condemns* violence as something to be arbitrarily or universally enjoyed.

5.3. Palatable practices

An interesting case arises in discussing two extremely dominant female champions: Ronda Rousey and Cris ‘Cyborg’ Santos. Both women have fights that end extremely quickly (often within the first minute of fights) due to a huge disparity in ability between them and their opponents. However, while Ronda Rousey’s fights are admired in practice, Cris Santos’s fights are seen as ‘uncomfortably’ violent. The dynamic of their fights are almost identical; discussing Santos:

Ariel Helwani (77, 51:11): “She annihilated another sort of faceless opponent and I said recently that I am uncomfortable with this now. I was sitting in that arena in Las Vegas and it was literally like we were about to watch a slaughter in front of our eyes. You knew what was happening and you knew it was happening in less than a minute.”

Conversely, on Ronda Rousey:

Luke Thomas (65, 9:14): “If you have a tank full of piranhas, there is something to be said for throwing a chicken in there, however morbid the idea. Just to see what they do. That's kind of what this is; this is lambs before the slaughter. And I think that has a certain appeal.”

While there was a consensus that Ronda Rousey’s fights were extremely enjoyable, the same dynamic featured in Cris Santos’s fights was seen as largely unappealing. What makes their fights so different? In describing Cris Santos’s previous fights, one commented that,

Ariel Helwani, (77: 51:30) “I don’t want to see these poor young women with their faces battered and their broken jaws, it’s just not why I love MMA...these fights to me as a fan, I have no interest in watching anymore...I have zero interest in watching Cyborg [Santos] fighting a [fighter with a] 5 and 1 [record] who has no business being in the cage with her.”

They note that her physical strength and size, as well as her ‘striking’ prowess, allows her to inflict very serious visible and structural damage to her opponents; this lends itself to an unpleasant viewing experience. Conversely, describing Ronda Rousey’s fights they note that, while she always ‘dominates’ and ‘annihilates’ her opponent, there is a fundamental difference that make her fights distinctly more enjoyable; the ‘palatability’ of her kind of performances. Ronda Rousey is seen as having a ‘Mike Tyson-esque’ appeal in that you are largely guaranteed a quick finish:

Jeff Wagenheim (65, 7:14): “What is the thing that kind of holds MMA back amongst other sports fans or other people out and amongst the culture? A lot of it is the blood and brutality, and Ronda Rousey fights aren’t generally brutal...She just does something [a submission] that makes the person quit and that’s a little bit more palatable if you’re somebody who might get a little squeamish when seeing a bloody...you know, you watch Cyborg [Santos] fight and just about every time the fight is brutal. [...] She [Ronda Rousey] does something that has a little something for everybody. Those people who don’t want to watch something

¹⁹ For example, an aging stand-up fighter or ‘striker’ (a fighter who relies more on techniques like punches and kicks rather than wrestling or ‘clinching’) would be paired with another ‘striker’ of a similar skill level, rather than a fighter who relies on ‘takedowns’ and techniques on the ground.

brutal get to see a result that isn't brutal, and those of us who watch the sport...I mean I watched that 14 second fight a hundred times just to see how she managed to get that submission in 14 seconds...Every single thing she did was purposeful and really perfect, and so she has something for everyone."

In this case, what we find is that there is a certain 'palatability' that comes from the 'soft' practice of submissions,²⁰ symbolically demarcated from the harsh 'brutality' of blood and broken bones²¹ of 'lopsided' striking contests. Importantly, an implicit, gendered dynamic may be operating here. American audiences generally see 'striking' as both more 'violent' and more 'masculine', while grappling and submissions are characterized as less 'violent' and more 'feminine' (Hirose & Pih, 2009). Thus, the 'brutality' of Cyborg Santos may be rooted in the 'masculine' understanding of her fighting style. This also fits with depictions of both fighters within the MMA community.²² Ronda Rousey's victories are also appreciated as technically masterful, rather than dominance through sheer 'brute force'. In describing another 'masterful' female striker, Holly Holm:

Luke Thomas (77, 11:40) "People think that elite striking means Cyborg-esque terrorism. It can mean that...Holly Holm – I'm not saying she doesn't have a big punch, but she's way better at distance management, at understanding real estate, at keeping in that range. She's not gonna get in the pocket and just start trading with you. That's just not what she does."

While Cris Cyborg's 'terrorizing' striking passes the 'threshold of repugnance' into the territory of 'excessive' violence, Ronda Rousey and Holm's more palatable practices operate within the moral worldviews and artistic values crafted by these MMA media members. Again, emphasizing the differences in nuance and technicality separates these more 'palatable' displays from the more 'base' enjoyment of fighters who simply 'stand and trades in the pocket'.²³ This frame *normalizes* MMA action, wherein certain kinds of practices become naturalized and taken-for-granted as both acceptable and enjoyable to watch.

5.4. Aesthetic violence

According to these MMA media members, what is the best that MMA has to offer? What is the aesthetic pinnacle of the sport? These kinds of discussions elucidate the kind of artistry within MMA that produces a kind of 'violence' that is not just fun, but beautiful. During a detailed discussion of which fight was their 'fight of the year' in 2013, the three panelists agreed that Jon Jones vs. Alexander Gustafsson was the best and most enjoyable.²⁴ Importantly, they reference several of the criteria mentioned above, and paint the fight as having almost 'sublime' and 'transcendent' properties:

Jeff Wagenheim (28, 17:40): "[Alexander] Gustafsson threatened [Jon] Jones. Jones threatened Gustafsson. Jones survives. That was another part of it. And the part that really puts it over the top for me, is that prior to that fight, Jones had not only beaten everybody but he was never even, he just completely thrashed everybody. And [Gustafsson] pretty much unexpectedly came up and stood toe-to-toe with him and took it to him. I can't see anything better than that."

Chuck Mindenhall (28, 18:52): "The way it played out...all the twists and turns, the plots, the re-rise of Jones, all that stuff. It has everything you would have in a fight, and it actually there's something happens in a great fight that makes a live moment, that something, life-affirming. I don't know how to explain but you're watching something so intensely, that it's almost like nothing else exists, you're so absorbed in a fight. That's one of those rare fights that really had me."

For them, several factors gave this fight its' 'sublime' quality: the surprise that Alexander Gustafsson (based on previous knowledge of his abilities) was initially winning the fight, the 'turning point' in which Jon Jones came back, the demonstration of perseverance, the high stakes (the light-heavyweight championship), and the new information gathered about both fighters based on their performances. This hints at the interesting and familiar rationales of appreciation, for example, the ability of cultural forms to have a plot and 'tell a story', to demand or capture the full attention of the receiver, and to reflect highly revered qualities of both humans and athletes (like perseverance).

More than simply a matter of enjoyment, the aesthetic pinnacle of the sport is also a means to create distinctions between the 'discerning' MMA connoisseur and the taste of more casual fans. Both Luke Thomas and Chuck Mindenhall demonstrate this in differentiating the 'best' fight (Jon Jones/Alexander Gustafsson) and the Diego Sanchez/Gilbert Melendez fight:

Luke Thomas (28, 16:06): "Listen, I thought Diego Sanchez and Gilbert Melendez put on a hell of a fight. [...] But I think if that's your fight of the year, there's a question of taste level, to be perfectly honest. That's just – I don't know how to say it more bluntly. *I question your taste.* So that being said, I'm going to go with John Jones and Alexander Gustafsson...Super high level technical MMA

²⁰ The appreciation of this palatable violence is supported by their admiration and enjoyment of the fights of Jiu Jitsu artists Damien Maia and Rousimar Palhares, both of whom have won fights by submission, without ever landing a single strike to their opponent.

²¹ Importantly, submissions can and do break bones occasionally. In fact, in one of the earlier fights of her career, Rousey broke someone's arm with an 'arm-bar' submission.

²² The President of the UFC Dana White has made several comments on the 'masculine' appearance of Cris Cyborg and her steroid use. Conversely, Ronda Rousey has been on the cover of several sports and fitness magazines, and is often described as 'beautiful' and 'marketable'.

²³ Essentially, this means that the fighters stay within range of each other's striking for long periods of time, exchanging blows.

²⁴ Importantly, the two most widely praised fights identified within the data, Jon Jones vs. Alexander Gustafsson and Rory MacDonald vs. Robbie Lawler, were both winners of the official 'fight of the year' award by *Fighters Only* magazine, and were both awarded 50,000 dollar 'fight of the night' bonuses from the UFC. Praise for these fights were universal with the MMA world, and seems indicative of a logical and coherent aesthetic system that extends beyond the sphere of MMA media to the UFC as a whole.

drama, after you couldn't believe what you were watching. And then that 4th round elbow and then that 5th round, just ridiculous. And for me, in fact, the 5-round fights where there's something on the line, something of significance, and they show high-level technique, and unbelievable demonstration of perseverance." (Emphasis added)

So what was wrong with the Sanchez/Melendez fight? What made labelling it the best fight a matter of poor taste? During a previous episode²⁵ Ariel Helwani mentioned that UFC commentator Joe Rogan said it was the best fight in MMA history. All three panelists (Luke Thomas, Chuck MindenHall and Michael Stets²⁶) agreed that Rogan's assessment was completely wrong.

Chuck MindenHall (22, 16:07): "There's this element of human preservation that fighters have as well, you want to preserve yourself, it's weird when you see that barrier come down and guys just stand toe to toe like that. And that's always an interesting transaction, especially for a guy like [Gilbert] Melendez with so much hanging in the balance, if he loses the fight or he got into a gun fight like that and plays roulette with [Diego] Sanchez which is what Sanchez likes to do. But we just watched Jones and Gustafson, and to me that's a better fight because it had so many different elements to it. There was a definitive turning point in that fight in the fourth round with the elbow, he was going to lose that fight if he doesn't land that, that's a huge change of events just in a single fight. There's fights like that that have more at stake and more hinging on every move that rings true for me as a big time fight."

As previously discussed, while the 'risky' or 'incautious' fighting in Melendez/Sanchez is fun and entertaining, it does not have the 'depth' of experience that these 'epic' fights entail. While some celebrate the recklessness of Sanchez/Melendez, these MMA connoisseurs appreciate different qualities: stakes, technique, the back and forth dynamic, and the tension constitutive of the pinnacle of MMA in practice. For Chuck MindenHall, this cannot be accomplished simply by two fighters 'throwing caution to the wind'; erecting a symbolic boundary between this 'fun' or 'interesting' fight, and the 'aesthetic' Jones/Gustaffson fight.

Throughout the discussions on The MMA Beat, the desire to watch technical, high level MMA continuously outweighs the desire to watch 'brutal' or bloody fights. In fact, these fights are almost seen as 'obnoxious' at times, in comparison to technical proficiency. Discussing Holly Holm:

Ariel Helwani (77, 12:39): "She doesn't have that power in her hands, and I kinda feel like she's a breath of fresh air. Do we always have to see rock-em sock-em robots, do we always have to see blood? I mean, that was as technical of a fight at 135 that you're going to see these days. In my opinion. As far as striking is concerned."

Again, this reduces the 'mass' audiences preference for the 'spectacular' almost banal and unsophisticated by the standards of the 'connoisseur'. While fights that these casual fans may find boring and 'insufficient', these 'connoisseurs' decode their mastery:

Jeff Wagenheim (77, 13:02): "She knows – I'm going to throw this kick, I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that – and it's very fluid and yet it doesn't necessarily, it's not going to knock somebody out with one punch. But those fans that felt it was boring, I mean, to each his own, but I'll tell you Marion Reneau is a good fighter and she was mesmerized by this. She couldn't do anything. It was like she couldn't move."

However, this intrigue or 'fresh air' of technicality, when combined with lengthy and violent bouts, can produce an 'aesthetic violence' that's enjoyment is beyond the normal realm of entertainment. Importantly, while "Jones-Gustaffson *murdered* each other, there was still a little bit of artistry to it...it's a little more subtle" (Luke Thomas, 28, 20:40 – emphasis added). When violence is discussed as adding to the enjoyment of a fight, it is described as having a noticeable 'visceral' response to the viewer, adding a 'narrative' that 'swings in real time', and a clear demonstration of 'will-power' or 'determination' – admirable qualities of humans and athletes in general. There is a clear distinction between 'brutality' and more 'artful' violence, which carry different affective experiences. A fight between Rory MacDonald and Robby Lawler was seen as "the kind of fight that casual or non-MMA fans would recoil away from" (Luke Thomas, 77, 32:33), so bloody that "pro-fighters were saying 'that's too much for me'" (Jeff Wagenheim, 77, 30:13), but was praised unanimously by MMA media. Because it was seeing as a high-level 'technical brawl' that demonstrated both toughness and technique rather than just 'brutality', it was highly regarded. When violence is the product of highly skilled, highly technical and tactical fighting, violence can sometimes add to the enjoyment of a contest. It is the understanding of these nuances that separate 'vulgar' tastes from the 'refined' aesthetic dispositions of these MMA media members.

It is not surprising, then, that these MMA media members deploy familiar 'aesthetic' language, which generally makes reference to the skill, technique, or physical ability of a fighter. In part drawing from the martial-arts traditions themselves, certain fighters are said to demonstrate 'artistry', 'virtuosity' or 'mastery' of their craft that should be appreciated. Similarly, visually appealing fighting styles are generally characterized as 'dynamic', 'flashy', and possess almost super-human speed, accuracy and power. Because of the limitations of aesthetic language in relation to fighting, analogies are frequently made to mainstream cultural forms, drawing analogies from cultural artifacts whose legitimacy are taken for granted as virtually self-evident. For example:

Jeff Wagenheim (28, 23:12): "Some of those other fights, those slobber-knocker fights that we've been talking about, they're just fan favourites. But a fight like this, when you're covering the sport, there's a different way you watch the fight. I mean, I'm thinking about what am I going to write about after, but at a certain point, I just abandon that, and I'm just appreciating it the same way I would appreciate a Renoir at the museum [or] going to listen to a Miles Davis record. There's something that

²⁵ Episode 22.

²⁶ Of mmamania.com and Sirius XM Radio.

Kinds of Action/Violence	Criteria for Membership	Form(s) of Violence/Action in Practice	Form of Appreciation	Rationale of the Frame
<i>Excessive Violence</i>	When the damage accrued by one or both fighters becomes unpleasant	'Brutality', Rule Breaking, 'Victimhood'	Discomfort, Repulsion, Disinterest	Condemnation
<i>Palatable Practices</i>	Acceptable and typical MMA, neither 'too much' nor 'too little' action	Standard MMA Matches and Outcomes, Normal Violence, 'Soft Violence'	Entertainment, Fun	Normalization
<i>Insufficient Action</i>	A lack of action or engagement between two fighters	'Risk Aversion', Passivity, 'Coasting'	Boring, Frustrating	Necessitation
<i>Aesthetic Violence</i>	The overlap of several criteria: good technique, perseverance, high stakes, the production of particular mental and affective states	'Technical Brawl', '5 Round Epics'	Transcendence, Sublimity	Aestheticization

Fig. 2. The aesthetic system of MMA media. This encapsulates their cultural work in relation to 'violence' and appreciation.

supersedes what's actually happening. There's a kind of art, literally Mixed Martial Arts at that moment, it's a whole different level of appreciation than we would normally have, seeing two guys beat the crap out of each other." (Emphasis in original)

Similarly, a very technical Jiu-Jitsu match between Damian Maia and Jake Shields was described as analogous to an 'indie-film' because, while most do not have the technical competence to understand it fully, 'you're not cool' if you did not enjoy it.

What are the functions of these analogies to highbrow culture like art, music, and film? In this, the claim is not that fighting is inherently aesthetic, but that, at its greatest moments, based on specific aesthetic discriminations of the MMA 'connoisseur', MMA is comparable to the already-legitimate products of art or music. More than that however, it creates 'distinction' in taste between fan favourite 'slobber-knockers' that merely entertain, and those that necessitate an 'aesthetic disposition' (Bourdieu, 1984) to appreciate as art. For these MMA media members, these are the fights that merit re-watching, that 'linger in the mind', that demand contemplation, and remind them why they chose a career covering MMA. In its totality, these rhetorical and analogical constructions are part of the *aestheticization* of violence, in which certain kinds of violence are treated as 'art'.

While on the surface, the enjoyment of MMA seems predicated upon the enjoyment of physical violence, these findings complicate this assumption. Certain kinds of violence can often become repugnant and repulsive, and some suggests perhaps an overabundance or oversaturation of violence within the sport. While some tire of the brutality of MMA, others look forward to matchups that have a 'strong chance of violence'. This contradicts accounts of 'insiders' who enjoy the sport *purely* for its technical component. While technical fighting is a valued commodity, when fights lack aggression or activity they often produce boredom and frustration for these particular media members. This suggests a necessary 'baseline' of action necessary for enjoyment. Furthermore, those technical fights that are extremely violent can often be the pinnacle of enjoyment, above and beyond the average MMA bout. Under close inspection, it appears that there are different kinds of violence and action in MMA in relation to enjoyment of the sport. Different forms of action can add, subtract, or are simply 'acceptable' in relation to the appreciation of MMA. While aesthetic violence is embraced wholeheartedly as artistic, excessive violence is condemned outright. In evaluating and crafting boundaries around these forms of violence, these MMA media members do not simply embrace or reject violence as part of the enjoyment of MMA, but construct new values and morals around violence and action as a (potentially) aesthetic experience (see Fig. 2 below).

5.5. Novelty as an exceptional case

While this typology is largely comprehensive of the aesthetic principles expressed on the MMA Beat, the contentious issue of 'novelty' within MMA matchmaking is somewhat of an exceptional case. Examples of 'novelty' include having a boxer, a pro wrestler from World Wrestling Entertainment, or having 'old' or retired fighters appear in pro-MMA fights. Novelty disrupts the general 'consensus' aesthetic system of MMA, as outline above, it can result in any 'type' of action (save perhaps 'aesthetic violence') and is a disputed topic on the MMA Beat.²⁷ For some MMA media members, organizations like the UFC are 'above' putting low-quality fighters in matches, regardless of the financial benefit and attention they would garner. Conversely, others believe that the

²⁷ This is not to confuse the 'ideal-typical' nature of this typology of violence and action. Underpinning the application of 'ideal types' is that virtually no fight will fit perfectly into one category. In reality, all fights possess aspects or moment of multiple kinds of violence and action. Further, in even the 'exemplars' of a given type, there would likely be moments of the other types.

'legitimacy' or 'legitimizing efforts' of the UFC often prevent them from putting on these enjoyable matches. A fight between two beloved 'old' competitors (Ken Shamrock and Kimbo Slice) was referred to pejoratively as a "train-wreck". But for others:

Mike Chiappetta (75, 32:32): "I think we need to thank them for giving us MMA's version of "Sharknado".²⁸ It was just as terrible and amazingly entertaining as we hoped, so what could you expect from a 51 year old that has more tread on his tires than anyone on the planet, and a 41 year old with arthritic knees? The fight was a little bit of a rollercoaster, it was interesting, it was controversial, so I don't know what more you could ask for except actual good MMA. But we don't watch all the time for good MMA, we watch for the story, and it was a story."

While for some the strangeness of these fights is both fun and compelling, others think that as a 'serious sport' MMA should be 'above' appealing to this level. The fight described above has the entertainment value of 'palatable' practices, but with the dangers of old age and weathered bodies in line with 'excessive' violence. In combination with their perceived lack of ability, this fight creates polarizing evaluations. Some of the discussants think the UFC as the 'elite' MMA organization should put on 'high level' fights exclusively, rather than these novelty fights with greater outside intrigue and 'name value'. Conversely, others miss the old 'gimmicky' cards that emphasized national rivalry, tournaments of weight classes, and entire fight-cards from only one weight-class. They even discuss novelty in the context of the enjoyment of 'excessive' violence;²⁹ in discussing an all-time favourite fight card:

Chuck Mindenhal (30, 39:02): "Vitor Belfort came back by knocking out Matt Lindland, and that was one of the few times I saw a guy twitching on the ground and thought "I hope he's ok". You literally aren't sure if he's ok. I was editing a paper, and Bobby Green was from our area and he got a late notice fight against Dan Lauzon, that fight was bizarre, point deductions for groin strikes ... the whole thing had a circus feel to it, and that's when Tito Ortiz conducted that awkward interviews. All that combined for a unique experience, and if you revisit it you remember all the bizarre stuff going on at the fight card."

Thus, we see two distinct models of enjoyment expressed on the MMA Beat. One is a more 'highbrow' form that consumes MMA for the sublime and transcendent experience, the contemplative elements, the skills, talent and the stakes involved. The analogies to high-status culture encapsulate these. The other more 'lowbrow' form consumes low-stakes, low skill fights that are compelling, not for their intellectual or contemplative qualities, but for their novelty and strangeness. These are similarly encapsulated by reference to low-brow entertainment like 'Sharknado' and the circus. While beautiful fights have a 'narrative' in themselves, novelty fights have a compelling background 'story' outside of the fight itself. There appears to be consensus among the panelist of the MMA Beat that the pinnacle of MMA is beautiful, 'artistic' and masterful. However, the place for novelty, risk-taking, and even gruesomeness within the sport is disputed. Importantly, while some believe commercial MMA sometimes lacks considerations for 'novelty' fights in their matchmaking decisions, the panelists agree that 'novelty' should be limited, and secondary to the 'elite' competition that the UFC's existence is predicated upon. This reflects the 'christening' of art for Becker (1982), in which "the consensus arises because reasonable members of the world have no difficulty classifying works under those circumstances. Constraints on what can be defined as art exist, but they constrain because of the conjunction of the characteristics of objects and the rules of classification current in the world in which they are proposed as art works" (1982, p. 155–156). Because 'novelty' does not fit within the system of 'aesthetic violence', its value is not consensual, and it fails to move beyond the boundaries of entertainment, and thus cannot be ratified as artistic.

6. Conclusion/implications

This paper hopes to demonstrate the analytical value of cultural sociology to MMA – and sports more generally – as well as the empirical value of MMA to cultural sociology. By analyzing MMA media as critics, aestheticians and connoisseurs, this paper highlights their pedagogical and evaluative role, as well as the moral and aesthetic system created within the 'internally legitimate' sphere of a violent and controversial sport. While implicit, clear boundaries, hierarchies, and moral and aesthetic values are erected around particular kinds of fights in MMA. Conversely, the analysis of a sport often deemed 'uncivilized' or 'barbaric' demonstrates how less consecrated cultural forms can mobilize aesthetic dispositions and forms of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Thus, not only does cultural sociology provide insight into MMA, perhaps MMA can deepen our understanding of culture.

Given the importance of an aesthetic system that is defensible, we find several frames deployed in which these salient MMA media members negotiate violence within the sport they see as legitimate. In making the distinction between different kinds of violence and action, 'excessive' kinds of violence are condemned rather than defended – attributing no merit or artistic value to 'grotesque' displays. Conversely, they necessitate a minimum of action required to be enjoyed. As a combat sport, a lack of action or aggression is seen as producing boring and unenjoyable MMA. Within these, there exists a realm of MMA in practice which is normalized as soft, palatable, and enjoyable in nature. This realm of MMA is appropriate as 'fun and entertainment'. Most importantly, however, at the pinnacle of the sport, MMA is aestheticized as a beautiful, legitimate, and transcendent art form. In 'aesthetic violence', MMA does not simply produce entertainment, but affective states and forms of appreciation analogous to fine-art. These aesthetic distinctions facilitate consensus among these media members (and potentially their audiences) as to why and when MMA is a legitimate cultural form with artistic merits. Moreover, this aesthetic system constitutes a means of distinction by both uniting MMA connoisseurs (and those who share their aesthetic sensibilities), and distancing themselves from the 'popular aesthetic' of mass audiences who lacks a 'proper' understanding of what makes MMA an 'art'. This is seen in the homologies of taste: spectacle/art, function/form, excessive/

²⁸ Sharknado was a made-for TV movie that was praised by critics for being 'so bad that it's good' or 'wonderfully mindless'.

²⁹ Which otherwise is distinctly unenjoyable.

aesthetic, vulgar/distinguished, ‘slobber-knocker’/technical brawl, etc.

While not a focal point in this paper, this research should also provide new insight into MMA and the ‘civilizing process’ (Elias & Jephcott, 1982; Elias & Dunning, 1986). This paper provides an ‘updated’ model of enjoyment from MMA media ‘insiders’, and adds to previous scholarship (García & Malcolm, 2010; Van Bottenburg & Heilbron, 2006) by introducing MMA action as an ‘internally legitimate art’ through the concept of ‘aesthetic violence’. While Eliasian scholarship has often treated the enjoyment of violence and technique as mutually exclusive (Van Bottenburg & Heilbron, 1996, 2006), for these MMA media members the height of enjoyment of MMA often seems to rest in the intersection of violence and technique. Moreover, when technical MMA operates without sufficient action and aggression, they bore and frustrate rather than entertain. Furthermore, ‘strangeness’ and violence can alone be entertaining, but as ‘novelty’ rather than something that should be consistently enjoyed. As a consequence, it is important not to treat violence simply as materially real processes and outcomes, or a motivating factor for consumption³⁰ (as Cheever, 2009; García & Malcolm, 2010; Van Bottenburg & Heilbron, 1996, 2006, and others do). Because Eliasian scholars focus on the psychological need for ‘stress-tensions’ produced through ‘mimesis’, they instrumentalize violence in sport through its production of particular affective states and sensations as part of a ‘quest for excitement’. Rather, we see that different kinds of violence and action exist in the practice of MMA, which hold different values and demand different kinds of appreciation. Unpacking relevant discourses around sports violence demands that it can also be treated symbolically: as an object of meaning-making, negotiated through language. This may offer a new approach to the scholarship on MMA as a spectator sport.

Lastly, while this paper has remained agnostic to possible problems or consequences of the aestheticization of violence, I think it is important to be weary of any attempt to make violence aesthetically legitimate. Consider for example, the case of fascism in Italy, where the aestheticization of violence was an ideological imperative. In fact, the ‘futurism’ movement in art was largely an attempt to make the technological advances in violence³¹ and warfare the object of appreciation.³² The founder of futurism Marinetti (1910) delivered a lecture titled “The Necessity and Beauty of Violence” in which he advocated for violence as an aesthetic and rejuvenating force (Dickson & Romanets, 2014). Fascism, like MMA media, sought not simply to normalize violence, but make it beautiful. Further, as Baudrillard (1993) warns, the commodification of any and everything produces the “aestheticization of the whole world” (p. 16), and that the ‘hyperreality’ (1994) of post-modernity can make occurrences of violence appear merely as spectacle, indistinguishable from its material reality. In this context, MMA media are not simply legitimating the aesthetic of MMA, but disrupting the semiotics of violence itself. Simply put, while the aestheticization of violence may seem innocuous to MMA insiders, its social and political consequences or potentialities may be a serious concern, especially if this aesthetic principle permeates beyond the ‘octagon’.

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³⁰ This is not a criticism of the Eliasian framework for the sociology of sport itself. Rather, this research suggests that the ‘quest for excitement’, as it relates to MMA, is more complex than previous scholarship had elaborated. The MMA media discourse analyzed here makes the dichotomy between the ‘spectacle of violence’ and the enjoyment of technique seem somewhat artificial. ‘Excitement’ can and does take many shapes as it relates to MMA.

³¹ Of a very different nature than MMA.

³² It is important to note that the aesthetic system established by MMA would render virtually all unsanctioned or ‘real world’ violence ‘palatable’ at best, but far more likely to be considered excessive and repugnant. The danger isn’t the abstracting of this aesthetic model to everyday violence; rather, it is simply the aestheticization of violence as an idea or an ideal which may have serious, negative implications.

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